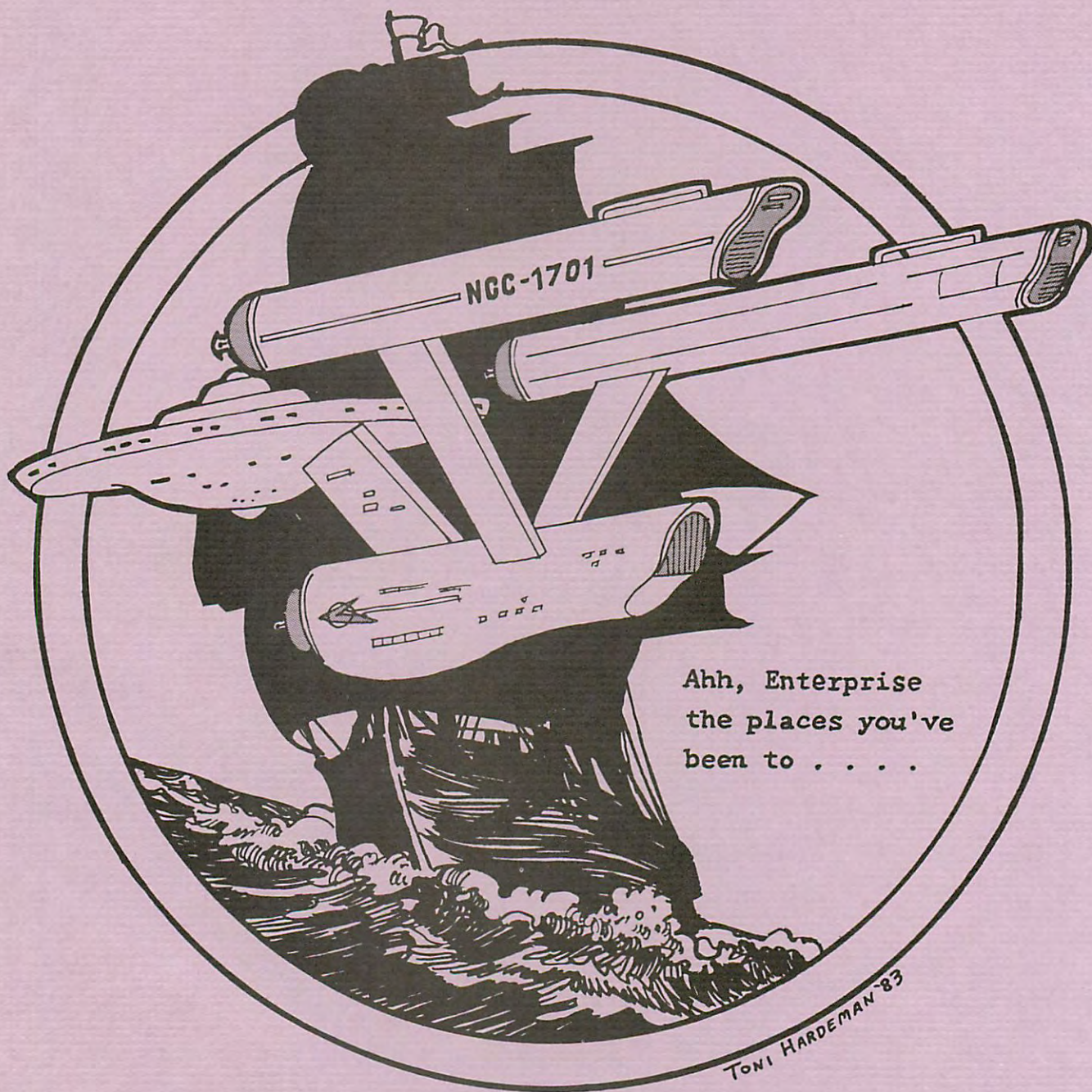




TREKism AT LENGTH VIII

Celebrating 20 Years of Star Trek



Ahh, Enterprise
the places you've
been to

TONI HARDEMAN '83

TREKism AT LENGTH 8

**EDITOR
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR**

**Vel Jaeger
Kim Knapp**

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Dedication



To the Memory of Roger C. Carmel 1932 - 1986

*"Human beings do not survive on bread alone ...
but on the nourishment of liberty.
For what indeed is a man without freedom ...
naught but a mechanism,
trapped in the cogwheels of eternity."*

•

"Knowledge, sir, should be free to all!"

•

"... Alas, gone to his reward."

-- Harcourt Fenton Mudd

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Editorial Ramblings

So we're a year late with our Twentieth Anniversary of Star Trek issue -- it's been a busy year. But since this is more than twice the size of our usual issue, think of TaL 8 as being a year-long celebration. Besides, consider the distance involved in our editorial process: with me in Florida and Kim in Washington state, we're as far apart as we could move and still be in the continental U.S. So far, so good. All of our contributors deserve huge thanks for staying with us through the countless delays. I knew it would be difficult adjusting to civilian life again, and owning our own home, but I hadn't counted on playing job roulette (I'm on my fourth one for the year) that included taking one former employer to Small Claims Court (I won). Nor had I expected to spend so much time in doctor's offices -- several rounds of bronchitis and a sprained neck for a bonus -- and I'm not even going to mention what our three children did to cause even more grey hair! Actually, without our SIG and zine activity, I probably would have gone screaming off into the night long ago. Fan fiction is one disease I hope they never find a cure for -- I'm in it for as long as we have contributors.

One of the perennial problems of editors is finding good proofreaders -- i.e., someone who has a keen eye for detail and a solid background in grammar, plus at least a nodding acquaintance with Star Trek characters (who knows the difference between Sarek and Surak, for example). There's a sub-clause in Murphy's Law which guarantees that all typos which elude us will be integral to the story plot, or damaging to a character an author has crafted with exquisite care. Thanks to having Isabell feed all the stories through a computer spell-checker, we've caught all the obvious stuff (teh, na, etc.) -- but computers don't know what should or shouldn't be capitalized, nor where punctuation belongs, nor how to differentiate between *two* and *too*, *hear* and *here*, *form* and *from*. See the problem? There's nothing we can do to correct errors in the first printing, but I really would like to hear from all you nit-pickers out there who delight in finding mistakes -- we can and will correct mistakes on the masters for reprints.

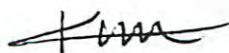
We're going to take a bit of a rest for a while, and work on a few other projects that have been shoved onto back burners. TaL 9 is going to be a series of stories by one author, so consider that issue filled; TaL 10 is theoretically accepting submissions, but contributors will have a long wait before seeing print in that issue. (Yeah, yeah, so what else is new?) Meanwhile, we hope you enjoy the issue at hand.



Even though I have control over the size of the print on this page, Vel didn't leave me much room for comments. But that's okay -- what did YOU do on Harmonic Convergence day?

This will be like getting a new zine for me -- other than my stories, I haven't seen much of what's in here. Just read the fliers, did the bookkeeping, and assembled the mailing list -- and did manage to finish the first of only 2 stories I've been able to complete since going to work here in Washington state. It's true what they say about this place -- six weeks of sunshine, and we're having a drought. Seattle is rationing water, handing out citations for those watering their lawns on the wrong days. Overall, fortune has been with me and I haven't been sick except once -- of course, that once happened to overlap the Trekruise -- which was still wonderful. Wish I could do it again and again and again -- I could have spent a month on that little island, no civilization around. Of course, after a while, I would go through withdrawal and start wanting a zine. Or five.

So here's another new one for all of us. I hope you'll enjoy it as much as I will -- any new reading material is to be coveted. Sometimes I even let it sit on my desk for 2 or 3 hours before I pick it up and start reading, shutting out the world.



About the Contributors

LYNDA CARRAHER

AGE: I don't think I know you that well. Let's just say that the first presidential vote I ever cast was for Benjamin Spock. (And, no, it wasn't in honor of our favorite Vulcan.) Therefore, if you're old enough to remember the candidacies of Dr. S, we're contemporaries. Birthday, I can share with you, being the acquisitive type who enjoys funny birthday cards with fat checks in them: December 22, "on the cusp" between Sagittarius and Capricorn. In other words, half the time I'm a horse's ass and the other half I'm a randy old goat.

OCCUPATION: Damage Control (in other words, community relations director for a small hospital, which means I get to write the press releases, design the ads, edit the newsletter, guide the kindergarten tours, smooth the ruffled feathers, and generally make nice to all of the people all of the time. At night, I come home and snarl at everyone just to make up for it.)

PRIME TREK ACTIVITY: Bun-watching .. um, er, writing.

GENESIS OF STORY ["An Uplifting Tale"]: A deprived sex life, a warped sense of humor, and *insatiable curiosity* about "what would happen if ...?"

ORIGINS: Well, you see, my mother was standing in line to get into a movie and there was this foxy-looking G.I. --oh. That's not what you meant? All right; if you insist. Born and reared in Idaho, dragged kicking and screaming to California by my parents at the tender age of 16, escaped to Oregon in '74 and haven't worn a pair of shoes since. Sturdy Anglo-Saxon peasant stock (and if you don't believe me, just take a look at these hips) with the obligatory dash of AmerInd. Irish by marriage, which entitles me to sing along with the Clancy Brothers and drink Bailey's without a license.

FAVORITE PASTIMES: Singing along with the Clancy Brothers and drinking Bailey's without a license.

IN SEPTEMBER OF 1966: It's too depressing to deal with. Suffice to say that television was not high on my list of priorities, and I didn't catch up with Trek until the mid-70's.

HOPES FOR THE FUTURE: That my children and their children will have a world to grow up in. That we will be able to avoid blowing ourselves to smithereens or drowning in our own garbage. That the political-military-industrial complex will get off its collective dead ass and start that long slow climb for the stars. That a day will come when no child will go to bed hungry while government silos bulge with rotting grain. You know. The usual starry-eyed idealist sci-fi, not pipedreams. (We doctors know a hopeless case if -- listen: there's a hell of a good universe next door; let's go.)

L. A. CASKEY

OCCUPATION: Television and Photography instructor at a midwestern college.

PRIME TREK ACTIVITY: Reading novels and fan fiction

GENESIS OF STORY ["Ripple Effect"]: Meg Zaleski of Vancouver, WA, is really responsible. She's the one who kept saying, "Just write it down and stop talking about it!" She also kept after me to send it in once I wrote it.

IN SEPTEMBER OF 1966: I was probably begging my mom to be allowed to stay up late and watch Trek.

PATT DEMETRI

BORN: July 5

OCCUPATION: Registered Nurse

PRIME TREK ACTIVITY: Cons, filking, zine collecting, poetry

ORIGINS: Born in Detroit, Michigan, Greek heritage; now living in Florida

FAVORITE PASTIMES: Fishing, sex

IN SEPTEMBER OF 1966: I was an Army medic

HOPES FOR THE FUTURE: Lots of money

KEN FEDUNIEWICZ

BORN: 9/30/51, ("I don't know how to compute *stardates*.")

OCCUPATION: Freelance artist

PRIME TREK ACTIVITY: Simply watching old reruns, collecting the movie series on videotape.

GENESIS OF ARTWORK CONTRIBUTED TO THIS ZINE: FM Author A. C. Willment asked if I'd care to contribute any art to accompany her stories for TaL VIII . . . and I agreed to do so.

ORIGINS: Born and raised in Jersey City, have lived in New Jersey all of my life (except for 6 weeks in Reading, PA).

FAVORITE PASTIMES: Cycling, swimming, videotaping old Lugos i movies, general self-improvement, reading "Soldier of Fortune" magazine for world news and current events.

IN SEPTEMBER OF 1966: Starting high school, working hard to post good grades (I did).

HOPES FOR YOUR FUTURE: If I'm successful at what I plan to do, no one reading this will ever forget me . . . (!)

DEBORAH GOBY

AGE: 36

OCCUPATION: Full-time accounts receivable clerk for a local truck dealership and part-time college student, working on a BA in Communication.

PRIME TREK ACTIVITY: Reading and writing, not necessarily in that order.

GENESIS OF STORIES: "Lest We Forget" is my attempt to place the memory of the crew of the Challenger in the ST universe and show how they would have influenced that universe. "We Three Kings" came to me while wrapping Christmas presents as a "what if . . ." "Chekov's Daydream" is an encapsulization of my own ability to fantasize so completely as to forget where I am and to interact with what I'm fantasizing. I see Chekov as having that particular type of unselfconsciousness, and I have, at times, been embarrassed in just the way he was. "To Love Again" came out of a comment Vel made, which I cannot now remember. "No Parking" was the result of my getting a parking ticket from the Chicago DMV when I hadn't been near the place since I was twelve. Chicago is notorious in Illinois for issuing parking tickets to people who haven't been there in years. It seems to be an annual spring rite. The story came out of total outrage, unholy glee, and a desire for revenge.

ORIGINS: Born in Springfield, IL, where I have lived all my life. If I could talk my husband into it, I'd move at the drop of a hat -- anywhere, except possibly either of the poles, preferably anywhere near a NASA installation.

FAVORITE PASTIMES: Reading, shopping, sunbathing, again, not necessarily in that order.

IN SEPTEMBER OF 1966: I was starting my junior year of high school and hating every minute of it, singing with the glee club, going steady with my boyfriend, and reading all the science fiction I could get my hands on.

HOPES, DREAMS, ETC: To complete my degree and go on for a Master's, at least; to move to NASA territory, and some day to write SF for a living.

TONI HARDEMAN

BORN: June 28

OCCUPATION: Graphic Artist

PRIME TREK ACTIVITY: fanzines -- reading and illustrating zines

GENESIS OF ARTWORK [inside covers]: the first illo was inspired by Kirk's line, "All I ask is a tall ship..."; the origin of the second should be obvious. Between the two drawings, though done several years apart, there's the completion of a cycle: birth and death, if you will.

ORIGINS: born in Thomaston, GA (McCoy country, 80 miles from Atlanta); traveled with Navy father all over the place, including Hawaii, Panama, Virginia, and finally settling in Michigan, where I finished growing up. Now a happy homeowner (actually, condo-owner) in Clearwater, Florida.

FAVORITE PASTIMES: needlework, raising goldfish, DR. WHO

IN SEPTEMBER OF 1966: I was attending high school and watching Trek and MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E., also reading all the SF I could lay my hands on.

HOPES FOR THE FUTURE: to change my "single by circumstance" status (as opposed to "single by choice"), and be more successful with my art, both in Trek as well as my paying job.

KAREN HUNTER

BORN: May 13.

OCCUPATION: Stay at home person

PRIME TREK ACTIVITY: Writing

ORIGINS: I was born in Chicago, and have since lived in Wisconsin, Georgia, and two places in Nebraska. My background is mostly Czech and Danish, with some assorted other stuff here and there. Not having known my ethnic grandparents, I don't have much ethnic culture myself, except for cooking. I love to eat in any language, as it were.

FAVORITE PASTIMES: Other than writing, I love to read. Mysteries and general science fiction are my most long lasting favorites, and I'm a Sherlock Holmes fan from way back. I also sew a lot and collect dolls, when I have any money left over after buying Trek things.

IN SEPTEMBER OF 1966: I was in college. We started school the week Trek debuted, and with the excitement, I missed the TV season almost entirely. I remember seeing Spock on the cover of the Tribune TV magazine, and being intrigued, but not enough to watch TV when I was in college. (Wish I had that magazine now!) Later a friend of mine told me about Trek and we started staking out the lounge TV on Thursdays so no one else could take over. It generally meant we had to sit through at least 1/2 hour of VOYAGE TO THE BOTTOM OF THE SEA, too. Now, folks, that was loyalty and sincerity.

HOPES FOR THE FUTURE: My kids are growing up, and I am thinking about where I will go and what to do when I am less a mother than just now. My recent return to college is finished, and I hope for something related to that, but I don't know how yet. There's too much to do to tie myself down to a job.

VEL JAEGER

BORN: March 8

OCCUPATION: Graphic Artist

PRIME TREK ACTIVITY: Any and all areas of fanzines (editing, writing, illos, graphics -- I even read 'em when I have a chance); attending cons when I can (especially love sitting behind a dealer's table and yakking with other fans -- everyone eventually circles the dealers room, and that's the best way to meet interesting fans).

GENESIS OF STORY ["Hello, Darkness, My Old Friend"]: Toni Hardeman and I saw ST IV for the first time together, and she said, "Imagine what that guy must feel like when she's never seen again!" That's all it took -- all these characters suddenly began conversing in my head, and I simply took the dictation.

ORIGINS: born in a tiny ski village in the Laurentians, north of Montreal, moved to Florida at age 4; mother Scottish-Canadian/Wisconsin Yankee, father Scottish/Canadian (clans include Armstrong and Graham). Spent about 15 years following my Marine husband around the country (North & South Carolina, California, and brief visits to Spain and Italy) before settling for good here in the auld sod. It's hard getting used to owning our own home again, but we're enjoying the adjustment to civilian life.

PASTIMES: When not involved with Trek, I love to grow things -- flowers, mostly, maybe next year a vegetable garden. And during cooler weather I make things with yarn and thread (knit, crochet, sew) while rewatching video tapes (we record just about everything SF that comes in on cable).

IN SEPTEMBER OF 1966: I was enrolled in college for my first full year, and wondering why on Earth I let myself get talked into such a harebrained idea -- and waiting eagerly for the first episode of this new SF series starring a foxy actor I'd been following for years (his career, you fools). I'd spent the previous summer discovering Heinlein, Clarke, and other SF giants, and was primed and ready for some good TV SF. I wasn't disappointed.

HOPES FOR THE FUTURE: To see all three of my children through high school without committing pedocide -- or suicide. Once that's accomplished, there's a super MFA program at my alma mater, the University of South Florida, just across Tampa Bay ... if I attain that lofty goal, who knows what's next! I've spent too many years living a month or two at a time to remember how to think that far ahead.

BONITA KALE

AGE: 41

OCCUPATION: Housewife/writer

PRIME TREK ACTIVITY: Reading/writing

GENESIS OF STORY ["Knowledge Sleeping]: Have been a Trek fan in a mild way since '67, I saw ST III in the summer of '84 and *something happened*. I bought a Trek novel and then another and another. I saw the movie a few more times. And when the kids started school, I sat down and wrote a scene from this novella -- not the first scene; I think it was one between the protagonist and the doctor. I've been writing (almost) every morning since, in spite of minor difficulties like babysitting and the summer we had six kids here. I've written ST stuff, articles, (a very few of which have been published in obscure magazines on child care, etc.), poetry, fantasy. Recently I joined a SF writers' workshop, which is very helpful. I don't know how it happened, but the second adolescence is a lot more fun than the first!

ORIGINS: A New York WASP transplanted to Cleveland

PASTIMES: Nothing interesting -- reading, taking walks

IN SEPTEMBER OF 1966: I was returning to a college dorm and deciding I couldn't stand it one year more. In December of 1966, I was getting married. And in January or February of 1967, we bought a TV and my husband said, "Haven't you seen STAR TREK? It's pretty good." He has regretted it often since, but how was he to know he was creating a monster?

HOPES FOR THE FUTURE: Fiction publication. **DREAMS:** that the world could be as STAR TREK sees it. It wouldn't be perfect, but it would sure be a lot better than what we've got.

LaVENA KAY KIDD

AGE: 47 years, 2 months, 11 days, 19 hours (Sorry -- Vulcan influence)

OCCUPATION: Student (returning to complete RN degree sidelined by marriage)

GENESIS OF ARTWORK: I don't drink, therefore, I don't have any excuses. (Ed note: one of several possible origins listed on the bio form sheet was "conceived at drunken revel.")

ORIGINS: I was born in El Dorado, Kansas, thus I am known as a Jayhawker -- *Don't ask!* My first English ancestors came to America in 1611: the Scottish portion of my family immigrated in 1789, but we aren't quite sure when our American Indian members goofed. Some say it was 48,000 BC, others 10,000 BC.

FAVORITE PASTIMES: Sewing, reading, cartooning, people-watching, grandchildren.

IN SEPTEMBER OF 1966: the only activity I can remember from then was baking my daughter's birthday cake for her 4th birth anniversary. Okay, so I don't lead an exciting life, but at least the cake was good.

HOPES FOR THE FUTURE: I would love to see myself graduate from college; beyond that, my mind refuses to function. Hopefully, this is not a permanent condition.

ISABELL KLEIN

AGE: A card-carrying member of the Captain Video generation

OCCUPATION: Itinerant Word Processor

PRIME TREK ACTIVITY: I like to watch the series

ORIGIN: Chicagoan -- born and bred

PASTIMES: Life-long Chicago Cubs fan.

IN SEPTEMBER OF 1966: I was there at the beginning.

HOPES FOR THE FUTURE: To win the Illinois lottery and live in a manner to which I am not now, nor ever have been, accustomed.

KIM KNAPP

AGE: Physically, 31, mentally -- well, I can still find that "sensawonda."

OCCUPATION: Graphics/word processing for the engineering support section of a gov't contractor in Bremerton. Also keep the computer network running well . . . I hope.

PRIME TREK ACTIVITY: Read, see movies, read, buy zines, read . . .

GENESIS OF STORY: All of my stories came from the desire to see through someone else's eyes, usually someone who had not been previously explored. In "A Fatal Honor" I saw Joachim as he must have been, not through the eyes of Khan's insanity -- idealistic, humanistic, compassionate, working for the good of the whole.

ORIGIN: On one side, mostly mongrel, and although we trace back to the MacGregor Clan, the ancestor who first came to America was deported as a bond servant, then showed up as a wealthy landowner. I wonder who he killed . . . As for the rest, your guess is as good as mine.

PASTIMES: Reading . . . reading . . . and reading. Also getting myself out of jams -- the kind made when telling Vel I can fit 9 pages of contributor's bios onto 6 pages of text. Then read some more.

IN SEPTEMBER OF 1966: I was 9½ years old, and distinctly remember standing behind a 4" post (on the "if I can't see them, they can't see me" theory) to watch television. Whether it was Trek or not, I don't recall.

HOPES FOR THE FUTURE: Real or impossible? I'd like to finish the novel and half-dozen stories in my head, raise my child successfully, wander the country for a few years, learn more -- about everything.

JANE LAND

AGE: 32

OCCUPATION: Housewife

PRIME TREK ACTIVITY: Writing and zine collecting

GENESIS OF STORY ["Confrère"]: Drifting off to sleep after watching JOURNEY TO BABEL.

ORIGINS: Hometown -- Westport, CT, then to college in Massachusetts (Wellesley '76, BA in Art History). Lived and worked in Cambridge, MA for five years while husband Stephen was in graduate school, then moved to Larchmont, NY to raise Sarah (now 8) and John (now 5).

FAVORITE PASTIMES: Cooking, riding (horses), reading

IN SEPTEMBER OF 1966: I was starting the seventh grade. A friend in my English class introduced me to STAR TREK. She was in love with Kirk, so naturally I had to fall for Spock, just to be different.

HOPES FOR THE FUTURE: to find a snappy retort to all those non-fan friends who ask constantly, "But when are you going to write a *real* book?"

STEPHEN MENDENHALL

AGE: Well, on Mercury I'd be about 121; on Pluto, .1159; Uranus, .4; figure it out from that.

OCCUPATION: Clerk, typist, researcher, writer, book reviewer -- choose one.

PRIME ACTIVITY IN TREK: Writing stories; I have a few filk-songs nobody's ever sung, but they have nothing to do with Trek.

GENESIS OF STORY ["Changes in ST", "The E-Team"]: Re-reading THE MAKING OF STAR TREK; speculation in STARLOG, letter columns, wishful thinking.

ORIGINS: English, German, Swedish, Scotch-Irish, Mid-west, lived in Michigan, Near East (Middle East is a misnomer, I'm told).

FAVORITE PASTIMES: Reading, doing notes for stories, browsing in libraries, bookshops.

IN SEPTEMBER OF 1966: I had gotten back from overseas the previous August, exactly a year and a day after leaving; I was 8 years old. STAR TREK came on at 8 and my bedtime was 8:30, and I wanted to watch it. I had already shown an interest in science fiction and writing stories.

HOPES FOR THE FUTURE: A steady job.

KAREN RHODES

OCCUPATION: Lieutenant (junior grade), US Coast Guard Reserve (Active Duty)

PRIME TREK ACTIVITY: Collecting, co-chairman to STAR TREK SECTOR: NORTHEAST FLORIDA

GENESIS OF STORY: Originally wrote "Exiles" as a scenario for the FASA STARTREK Role-Playing game, but couldn't get any gamers to game it with -- so I turned it into a story.

ORIGINS: Born in Long Beach, California, lived in Florida 32 years. Married a Florida cracker. Background very dull -- all WASP! Tracing genealogy back to the 3rd Earl of Sunderland -- maybe related to Princess Di.

FAVORITE PASTIMES: Writing! Word processing. Learning the guitar. One of these days, I'll Filk!

IN SEPTEMBER OF 1966: I was attending Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL

HOPES FOR THE FUTURE: To publish a professional novel. Retire and tour the country in a motor home with my husband.

ELAINE SHEPPARD

BORN: December 3, 1963

OCCUPATION: Graduate Student in Clinical Psychology

PRIME TREK ACTIVITY: Writing poetry; collecting zines and novels

GENESIS OF POETRY: My poems are obviously inspired by many of Trek's great "one-time only" characters. With all the attention given the regulars, I thought it might be nice to give some of the guest roles equal time.

ORIGINS: Born in Charleston, WV and raised in the nearby town of Peytona. I now live in Huntington, WV, where I attend Marshall University. On Mom's side I'm Scotch-Irish; on Dad's side, strictly WASP.

FAVORITE PASTIMES: (In no particular order) shopping, reading, watching TV and movies, collecting records, playing tennis, collecting memorabilia on British royalty and other celebrities, genealogy, travel, Trivial Pursuit, ceramics, and STAR TREK!

IN SEPTEMBER OF 1966: Since I wasn't quite 3, it's hard to remember. Based on the recollections of others who were present at the time, I was probably driving my babysitter (who just happened to be my Grandma) crazy by demanding to watch television constantly (Yes, I vaguely remember the Great Salt Vampire from the very first go-round).

HOPES FOR THE FUTURE: I hope to become a clinical psychologist (Master's degree, possibly a Ph.D. later on). If I'm lucky, I'll end up in private practice -- helping people and making at least *some* money (I believe in altruism *and* materialism).

A.C. WILLMENT

... was exactly 11 years, 5 months, 6 days and 12 hours old when the fanfare first sounded on NBC-TV heralding the joyous tidings that Unto Us a TV Show was Given. *Don't ask* what the initials mean.

A female since birth, A.C. is now a mild-mannered reporter at the Times-Beacon in Manahawkin (Lenni Lenape Indian for "land of good corn") and living in Lakehurst ("Land of the Crashing Airships"). In her rather piebald career, she has worked in professional theatre public relations, as a janitor in a high school, on an electronics assembly line, and also stood on the unemployment line briefly. She has visited Australia, England, Israel, Turkey, Greece, Fiji, California, and most recently Scranton, PA, which explains why she is broke.

A born jackdaw, A.C. collects just about anything with a Star Trek insignia on it, and her prizes now include a complete set of all paperbacks, eight Mego dolls, seven model kits (The Enterprise, Klingon Bird of Prey and Vulcan Shuttle hang from the ceiling, infuriating the landlord), and original Gray Morrow art which is dearer to her than life itself.

The "Tales of the Fifth Year" began back in 1966, and after lying dormant for years, accreting scraps of ideas and bits of daydreams, rose up out of her head like the Swamp Thing, terrifying all that beheld them.

She is the offspring of a teacher/journalist/PR representative and an Australian nurse, who married in 1944, two days before he shipped from Brisbane to the Philippines.

In September of 1966, she was a sixth-grader at Somerville School in Ridgewood, NJ, Land of her birth, just hitting puberty and writing her "juvenilia," as the early works of great writers are usually called. She also writes Non-Trekfiction, and in 1984 won a prize for playwriting which led to a small-scale production of her play, "Psalm in A Minor" at the University of Illinois in Macomb. When not writing, she sleeps, reads, walks on the Jersey shore in good weather, spends money on Trek chatchkas, and plays with her pet budgies Leonard and Spock (soon to be joined by her tabby kitten, DeForest FurDeTrees).

Someday, A.C. hopes to have her plays performed all over the world, or at least to a wider audience, and she would love the chance to spend an hour talking to DeForest Kelley -- not as "fan" and "star" but as normal human beings. (This ambition may be handicapped by the fact that she is emphatically not a normal human being.) And to marry a man she loves and stay with him for the rest of her life, and perhaps beyond.

LEST WE FORGET

BY DEBORAH GOBY

"Name, please?" The young ensign behind the registration desk smiled at the slender girl in front of him.

"Nyota Uhura," she answered in a quiet voice.

"Uhura," he muttered, his fingers playing over the keyboard. "Ah, here it is. I see that you're our Ride scholar in this class. I hope you know that the instructors will be expecting a lot from you."

"So I've been told," she replied with a confident smile, "but I think I can manage."

The young man looked at her consideringly. "Yes, I think you can." He touched another button on his keyboard and the printer extruded a card. "Here's your student ID. Your class schedule and dorm assignment are on the back. The orientation and campus tour starts in half an hour at the Hall of Heroes. That's just down the corridor, on your right."

"Thanks for your help," Uhura said, slipping the card into her pocket.

"That's what I'm here for," he answered with a grin. "Anyway, welcome to Starfleet, and good luck."

"Thanks." She turned and walked out the door, going down the corridor until she saw the sign that said, "Hall of Heroes."

The room was huge, the walls set with vidscreens with brass plates beneath them. At the far end was a stage with rows of chairs. In the foreground, on a platform cordoned off with velvet ropes, stood a large metal object, the surface blackened. Uhura recognized one of the old space capsules from pictures and walked closer, wondering which it was. "Apollo I" was the title on the plate set into the platform. She was reading the legend below the title when a voice spoke from behind her.

"Small, isn't it? It's hard to believe that men actually went into space in something as tiny as this."

"Yes, it is," she turned to look at the man. "They really were heroes, weren't they, these first men and women who attempted space flight."

"Dan Scobee," he held out his hand, "I guess we're going to be in the same class."

"Nyota Uhura," she said, taking his hand and smiling at him, "my friends call me Uhura."

"Nice to meet you, Uhura. I hope we'll be seeing a lot of each other. What's your major?"

"Communications. What's yours?"

"Engineering. We should have some classes together; there's a certain amount of overlap in the two fields."

"You're right. Maybe we can pool our notes." She smiled again; he was attractive.

"Sounds good to me." He gestured around the hall. "What do you think of it?"

"Starfleet? Or just this room? Either way, it's a little overwhelming. I've never been here before."

"You haven't?" Dan looked surprised. "Not even to register?"

Uhura shook her head. "No, I did a transfer registration at the southern campus of UUAS."

"Well, you'll have to let me be your guide then. I've always wanted to be in Starfleet and I only live a short distance away. Besides, one of my ancestors is in this hall." He took her hand, "Come on, I'll show you." He led her over to one of the vidscreens on the wall. It was a portrait of seven people, five men and two women. He pointed to the dark-haired man in the middle. "Captain Francis Scobee, my great-times-twelve grandfather."

Uhura looked at the plaque beneath the picture. "Challenger" read the title. "He died, then? I understood that all the people honored in the Hall of Heroes died in space or trying to get there."

Dan nodded, "Yes, he did. The whole crew of Challenger died when it exploded just after takeoff." He glanced at his chronometer. "We've got enough time. I'll start the video." He touched the button on the brass plaque.

The picture changed and began to show the seven people individually while a man's voice recited names. "Francis Scobee, Michael Smith, Ronald McNair, Ellison Onizuka, Judith Resnik, Gregory Jarvis, Christa McAuliffe." The picture changed again, to show the shuttle on the launch pad, flame and smoke streaming from its rocket boosters. Then, with a mighty roar, it lifted majestically from the pad, soaring into the sky in a graceful arc. Moments later, with a sound like a thunderclap, it exploded, debris flying everywhere. Then the screen began flashing pictures of people in tears, shock and horror written large on their faces, and memorial services and ceremonies, while a voice continued to tell the story of the disaster. Uhura's own dark eyes filled with tears as she listened and watched. The final shot was of hundreds of people standing along a beach holding lights and candles, the light reflecting back from the dark water. When the picture focused on a burly, bearded man who started to say something, then turned with a wracking sob to bury his face in his wife's shoulder, she gave an audible sniff and reached into her pocket for a tissue.

Dan squeezed her hand, "I know," he said sympathetically, "it gets me that way, too."

The picture returned to the seven members of the crew as the narrator continued, "The National Aeronautics and Space Administration, up to the time of the Challenger explosion, was woefully underfunded and at the mercy of political maneuvering. The disaster led to a public outcry of such magnitude that, for the first time in its history, the agency received adequate funding and was released from the machinations of political parties. This was the beginning of Starfleet as we know it today. For this reason, Starfleet accords the Challenger crew special honor and gratitude."

Uhura wiped her eyes. "It's so sad. They didn't even get to realize their dream."

"I know, Dan replied, "but they and all the people honored here made it possible for us to realize ours." He looked around the room, then glanced at his chronometer again. "We'd better find seats; it's about time for the orientation to start."

They were just sitting down when a man in an admiral's uniform walked onto the stage and took the podium. He introduced himself as the Commanding Officer and Dean of the Academy, then made a standard welcoming speech. Uhura only half listened, her mind still occupied with what she had seen. As the admiral concluded his speech with the announcement that the lieutenant standing by the door would now conduct a tour of the Academy, she decided that she would come back to the Hall to see all the videos as soon as she could. She glanced at Dan, sitting next to her, and decided to ask him to come with her. It was, after all, a good excuse to get to know him and he had offered to be her guide.

As they stood up and followed the rest of the group toward the lieutenant, Dan touched her shoulder and said in her ear, "When we get out in the hall, look back and see what's written above the door."

In the corridor she turned and looked to see, carved in marble above the great double doors, the words, "Lest We Forget."

The Winds of Change

by Elizabeth Small

Dedicated to the memory of Roger C. Carmel and his wonderful characterization of the Star Trek's most engaging rogue -- Harcourt Fenton Mudd.

"Request permission to come aboard, sir!"

"Permission granted," replied the Officer of the Day.

"Lieutenant Curtiss reporting for duty, sir."

"Welcome aboard the Belinda, Curtiss. Captain's briefing at 1600 hours, main briefing room. You'll be bunking with..." and here the OD consulted his clipboard, "...Lieutenant Tarrant, Deck 5, Cabin 28."

Curtiss nodded, expecting the usual lessening of military protocol now that the boarding ritual was completed and both officers being of equal rank. The Belinda, it seemed, was run along different lines.

"I'm waiting, mister."

Curtiss stiffened instinctively at the tone in the duty officer's voice, a man he estimated to be slightly younger than himself.

"Yes, sir," Curtiss replied, feeling the years slipping away as if he was an Academy plebe again, being dressed down by an upper classman. He would have bet such a reaction couldn't be rekindled except perhaps by the occasional admiral or two, but there it was again, an ingrained response which refused to remain buried.

Placing his clipboard precisely on the transporter console, the OD moved in front of Curtiss. "I don't know what you're used to, mister, but on this ship we go by the book. And when a superior officer asks a question, Lieutenant, you will respond with the proper military courtesy. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir. By the book, sir."

The shimmer of the transporter beam shifted the OD's attention from Curtiss to the newly arriving crew member and Curtiss was dismissed with little more than a wave of the hand. Grabbing his small bag, Curtiss escaped the transporter room, but not before noticing, out of the corner of his eye, something vaguely familiar about the shape taking form on the transporter platform. He dismissed the thought as quickly as it occurred. This was not a time to be seeing friends or, worse yet, enemies.

Despite the transporter room lecture, the ship itself held an air of neglect — not physical neglect as there was no peeling paint or trash in the corridors, or any other obvious indications of something amiss. Such would not be expected. Rather, the neglect was of the spirit — a sense that all was not right on the Belinda. Curtiss could neither articulate the feeling nor pinpoint the source. He simply knew it existed.

Cabin 28 was one of the smallest double cabins Curtiss had ever seen. Two minuscule sleeping areas separated by an equally small common area made for crowded living. Tarrant better be likable or this cruise would be even more unpleasant than anticipated.

Curtiss quickly stored his few possessions, then looked unsuccessfully for a security safe for the computer tape in his hand. Finally deciding that the best place to hide something was in plain sight, he tossed them casually on to the empty desk in the common area. First, coffee, then the briefing, and he set off in search of a food dispenser.

The main rec room was empty. Curtiss walked through the silence to the food dispenser, noting the austerity of the surroundings. The precise placement of each chair and table resembled a museum exhibit — all that was missing was the requisite "Do Not Touch" signs. It was . . . unnatural. This was crew space, and the crew had rejected it.

The coffee was tepid. Curtiss dumped it into a recycler, kicked the food dispenser, and tried again. The result was the same. Curtiss disgustedly disposed of the second cup and with a final look around, headed for the main briefing room.

A number of individuals had arrived before him. Curtiss maneuvered his way into the middle of the group where he would be close enough to see without attracting undue attention. He was extremely curious concerning the Belinda's command. Tepid coffee and empty rec rooms were dismal beginnings to a cruise.

The briefing took less than ten minutes. The usual welcome message was omitted. "Stay out of trouble" and "don't make waves" were dominant themes. The effect was disheartening.

Captain Cardello was an intense, older man, the gray sprinkled liberally through his hair. His bearing was stiff and formal; his manner cold, distant. The introduction of his senior officers was curt, bordering on rudeness. His voice added to the overall impression of a self-contained, extremely reserved individual who rarely met anyone he liked. Curtiss sensed a lack of depth in Cardello, a feeling that there was more image than substance to the man.

The captain only stayed a few minutes, leaving the first officer, Lieutenant Commander Macey, to conduct most of the session. Macey exuded a confidence Cardello lacked. Only the stripes on their sleeves differentiated their relative ranks. A stranger would pick Macey as the captain merely because his behavior was more commanding, more in control.

As the group was dismissed, Macey called Curtiss aside and ordered him to remain. Curtiss was fairly certain he knew the reason. Macey waited until the room cleared before speaking.

"Curtiss, your reputation has preceded you. The record is replete with reprimand after reprimand. Why you haven't been discharged from this service, I'll never understand. But this time," he threatened, "one step out of line and you're through. Your last captain. . ." he glanced down at his notes, "Kirk on the Enterprise says that he won't have you back on his ship for any reason. The first officer is equally scathing in his condemnation, if considerably more succinct. I do not like having the leavings of others on this ship, mister, and I will not tolerate your usual insubordination." Now he did look up. "Do I make myself clear, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, sir!"

"One step out of line, just one, and I'll put you off at the very next port. We do things by the book on the Belinda. I expect you to remember that. Do your assigned job, and don't cause any trouble. Is that clear?" he asked again.

"Yes, sir!"

"Dismissed!"

Curtiss spun on his heel and left the room, relaxing his stiff bearing only when safely in the corridor. The interview was not as bad as expected — it could have been a whole lot worse. Macey had not even suggested the "clean slate" routine. Obviously, everything in the record would be held against Curtiss.

Jeff Tarrant was sprawled on his bunk when Curtiss returned to the cabin. He

smiled and held out his hand without bothering to move. "Welcome."

Curtiss grinned. "A friendly face. I was beginning to think there weren't any on this tub. Jim Curtiss," he said as he shook Tarrant's hand.

"The Belinda is rather off-putting when you first come on board," Tarrant agreed. "The captain likes to do things --"

"-- 'by the book'. So I've been told -- several times. In my experience, the book is whatever the guy above you says it is."

"Somehow I didn't expect to hear that from you," Tarrant said cryptically. He eyed Curtiss' red shirt. "You'll have to get some tunics with the ship's logo from stores. Where you assigned?"

"Communications, alpha watch."

There was a slight pause, as Tarrant eyed Curtiss curiously. "I thought maybe you'd be wearing gold."

"What makes you say that?" Curtiss asked.

"I heard you give a lecture at the Academy on command decisions . . . you or your twin brother."

Curtiss smiled easily. "Must have been my brother."

"Sure," Tarrant agreed, unconvinced. "Thought I should let you know."

"There isn't anything to know."

"If you say so," Tarrant agreed. "Alpha -- that's Macey's shift. Probably wants to see you do your stuff."

"Macey? The first officer? Not the captain's?"

"Not on the Belinda," Tarrant smiled a little as he said it.

"Have I missed something?"

"Not really," Tarrant replied. "It's just that 'not on the Belinda' is something of a catch phrase around here." He vaulted from the bunk. "Interested in some food?"

"And some new tunics."

"Right!"

Later, wearing the Belinda's logo emblazoned on a red tunic, Jim Curtiss followed Jeff Tarrant to a small rec room on the engineering deck. A burst of noise greeted them as they entered. Crew members covered virtually every inch of space, many sitting in small groups on the floor -- all the chairs already taken.

"I expected this kind of scene in the main rec room," Curtiss admitted, "though not so crowded."

"Another quirk of the Belinda. Most of the crew gather here--"

"--because the senior officers don't."

"Correct," said a new and very feminine voice. "You learn fast." She held out her hand. "Mary Gerard."

"Jim Curtiss."

"Welcome, Curtiss."

Mary Gerard was small and pretty, with softly curling brown hair and wide, smiling gray eyes. She wore the red uniform and logo of ship's services.

"She should have said, 'Mary Gerard, Security Chief'," Tarrant explained.

Curtiss's eyes widened at the introduction, though he knew he shouldn't be surprised. Try as he might to shake the stereotype, he was one of those people who assumed security people were all seven feet tall with muscles to match. That this tiny woman should head Security on this or any ship seemed incongruous.

Curtiss' carefully calculated "melt the hardest heart" smile was repelled with equanimity. He was going to have to work harder than that if he wanted to get to know Lt. Gerard better -- a lot harder. Curtiss accepted defeat gracefully. One skirmish did not a battle make and he would enter the lists again as soon as practicable.

"I should have warned you, Jim," Tarrant said, "our Mary doesn't take any of us seriously."

"Would you take you seriously?" Mary asked.

"Yes, I would," Tarrant replied, but his tone belied his words and they all laughed.

Curtiss looked around the room. The Belinda's crew tended to be young, brand new shiny ensigns and newly promoted lieutenants. Curtiss found himself an "ancient" at thirty-four. Lieutenants were a varied lot. For some, it was the second rung of the career ladder many hoped would lead ultimately to command rank. For others it was a final step, necessitating in some instances painful self-assessment and the realization that their best was just not good enough. There was a third group who seemed content in the rank, untroubled by either the lack of promotion or the uncertain future. Career lieutenants -- Curtiss appeared to be one of the latter group.

"Give me the scoop on the brass," Curtiss requested. "Always like to know where to draw the line."

"You draw the line?" Mary asked doubtfully. "I guessed differently. Figured you go flat out after anything that catches your eye." She eyed the single stripe on Curtiss' sleeve. "But, I've been wrong before," she added.

"I prefer to take things as they come. But I'd just as soon avoid unpleasantness."

"Now why do I think that you might have trouble with that," Tarrant asked.

"Probably for the same reason I do," Gerard suggested. "You, Lieutenant Curtiss, are an enigma," she stated flatly.

Curtiss held his hand out. "I'm an open book," he declared. "But isn't anybody going to clue me in on who to avoid around here?" he asked plaintively.

"About the only thing that's different on this ship than the others I've been on is that Captain Cardello pretty much leaves things to the first officer." Tarrant said. "That, of course, is based on my vast experience of two previous cruises."

"And she goes strictly 'by the book'!" Kirk added.

"Oh, absolutely, 'by the book'!" Tarrant mimicked and everyone laughed.

"Macey likely to get his own ship?" Curtiss asked casually.

"Not if the grapevine's on the ball. He supposedly failed a psych evaluation somewhere along the line. And if that's true, then running Cardello's ship is the closest he's going to get to a command of his own."

"Must be frustrating for him," Curtiss said. "All the work; none of the glory."

"Doesn't seem to bother him that much and the rumors are probably untrue, anyway. The Belinda's grapevine isn't all that good. What this ship needs is a better grapevine!" Tarrant declared loudly, pounding his fist on the table.

Agreement chorused from the nearby tables and the conversation turned to other things, leaving Lieutenant Curtiss digesting several interesting tidbits of information.

♦♦♦

Lieutenant Curtiss reported early for his duty shift the following day. The extra time would give him the opportunity to watch his predecessor run the board and perhaps pick up a few ideas of the eccentricities which each communications console developed with use.

By the end of his shift, Curtiss admitted to himself that he had spent worse duty shifts, but those had been under hostile fire with lives in the balance. For a routine shift in orbit, this one could only be described as harrowing. Macey wanted every piece of information the Board could provide -- useful or not.

A welcome relief came when Curtiss was ordered to Sickbay for his boarding physical. Never had the prospect of being poked and prodded been more inviting. He gratefully turned the board over to his relief and headed for the turbolift. His overall performance, however, had not measured up and the first officer was not pleased.

"Lieutenant!" Macey stopped him as he was about to enter the lift.

"Sir?" Curtiss, genuinely puzzled, forgot to emphasize the word.

Macey got up from the command chair and walked slowly over to where Curtiss casually waited.

"Attention!"

Curtiss braced.

"Mister, don't ever use that tone of voice to any superior officer on this ship. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"A brand new ensign could have handled that board better than you did, mister. If we had been in combat, your actions today could very well have lost the ship. I had better see a lot of improvement on the next shift or your stay on the Belinda will be most unpleasant. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, sir!"

"All right, Curtiss, dismissed."

The lift was slow coming and Curtiss had to wait for several minutes. Being chewed out before others was never pleasant and waiting for the lift added to the discomfort.

The sickbay reception area was already crowded when Curtiss arrived. He gave his name to the nurse on duty and settled down with the others, anticipating a long wait.

As expected, he was the last to be called into the examination room. The doctor's back was to him when he entered, but there was no mistaking the physician's identity.

"On the table, Lieutenant," the doctor ordered, not bothering to turn around as he read Curtiss' medical history. "You know the routine."

As Curtiss got up on the diagnostic couch, the doctor, med scanner in hand, turned and slowly moved it over the prone figure, studying the readings.

"Um." The doctor put aside the scanner, picked up a stylus and began writing on his clipboard.

"Is that all you can say — um?" Curtiss asked.

"I can recognize my own clinic notes when I read them, Lieutenant."

"Sorry, sir."

"You know," the doctor mused, blue eyes gleaming, "I kinda like that. First time you've ever 'sir'd' me that I can remember."

"On the Belinda, I doubt it will be the last," Curtiss replied. "Just don't get too used to it, though."

The doctor finished writing up his notes, nodding toward the lieutenant. "You can get up. I won't bother with the rest — your last annual wasn't that long ago. I seem to remember ordering a little R & R. Is this how you obey your old family doctor?"

"You, Doctor, recommended a change," Curtiss pointed out as he pulled his tunic into place. "The Belinda is a change."

"I'll say! But whatever you're up to, Jim, be careful. I don't want to see you back here — except for a visit."

"What makes you think I need to be careful?"

"Well, it stands to reason. Starfleet Command doesn't make a habit of transferring starship captains to lieutenant's berths on ships like the Belinda unless there's something wrong and, if something's wrong, somebody's in danger. And where there's danger — well, I don't have to spell out the rest of it. . . . Anybody else know?"

"Just my cabinmate — seems he went to a lecture once."

McCoy grinned. "You can get in a lot of trouble that way. Personally, I avoid lectures on principle."

"I could ask what you're doing on the Belinda?"

"Just a case of being in the right place at the wrong time. They needed a temporary replacement and I happened to be available. Simple as that. Try to avoid injury, if you can, not that I think that's possible."

"I don't remember seeing you at the captain's briefing."

"On the Belinda, the brass doesn't mix with the lesser mortals. By the way, where do the ranks hang out around here? The main rec room usually looks as if the ship's in the middle of a red alert."

"As you said yourself, on the Belinda the 'brass don't mix.' Try the small rec

room in Engineering. Might be more to you liking, Doctor, sir."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. I may see you there."

"It will be my pleasure, Doctor, sir."

The last thing Curtiss heard before the door swished closed was McCoy's distinctive chuckle following him out of the sickbay.

Jim Kirk had been eagerly anticipating shore leave on Wrigley's while his ship was undergoing routine updates at Starbase 10. He certainly didn't expect to find himself manning a communications console on the Belinda. But somebody was providing the Klingons with dilithium crystals and the trail had led to the Belinda.

Starfleet Command wanted someone young enough to pass for an "older" lieutenant, but who also had enough command experience to assume control of the ship should that become necessary. Previous encounters with the Klingons and combat experience were added pluses. Headquarters computers hummed and matched the profile with available personnel. With the Enterprise in dry dock, Kirk was available and the orders were cut. He was to discover the identity of the smugglers and if possible details of the supply chain. Kirk didn't like the role of undercover cop, but aside from stating his objections, there was little else he could do to change the orders.

Kirk spent two days at the starbase familiarizing himself with the com board, and then proceeded to Starbase Eight and boarded the Belinda with other crew replacements as Lieutenant James Curtiss.

The Belinda left orbit the following afternoon. Captain Cardello, in the center seat, appeared slightly nervous, drumming the fingers of one hand continuously against the arm of his chair. Kirk found it irritating, but had to remind himself that he, too, was guilty of similar behavior — but not, on routine departure from orbit.

The first officer was at navigation console. He, too, appeared tense. The rest of the bridge crew were youngsters — Ensign Kim was at the helm was a recent academy graduate and Lieutenant Elijawan at the science station was on his first space mission. Kirk was handling communications as they eased out of orbit and settled on course for their patrol sector.

The Belinda was an older ship. She hadn't the speed or the versatility of a cruiser, but did hold a significant place in fleet operations. She and her sister ships provided Federation presence, visiting inhabited planets on good will missions, assisting vessels in trouble, generally providing "stability" by merely being in the area — serving with honor, if not distinction. But to those she visited, the Belinda was an important link to the Federation and a welcome and honored guest.

The shift was uneventful, as were those that followed. Curtiss stood his watch, establishing himself as a potential troublemaker while hoping to entice the smugglers into recruiting him. He spent his free hours either in his cabin or in the rec room, playing a cutthroat brand of chess and contributing his share to the endless gab sessions that filled the empty hours between watches. His open contempt for the Belinda and Starfleet itself, combined with a sharp, biting wit, established him at the center of a group unhappy with their lot and their officers and not reticent about expressing themselves. Kirk hoped to pick up some useful information, as the crew usually knew far more than the senior officers thought.

On the second night out, the ship's doctor found his way to the rec room "near Engineering." There was a noticeable lessening of the noise level at his arrival as well as some outright stares in his direction. McCoy ignored them all as he looked around the room. Spotting the chess tournament sign-up sheet, he walked over to add his name to the list. He stood there for a minute, again looking around the room, before joining a group of kibitzers around a game in progress. The crewman next to him pointedly moved slightly away, but as the game neared its conclusion and the group drew perceptibly closer to the table, shoulders once more touched in camaraderie.

Lieutenant Curtiss won the game with his own aggressive style which made up in audacity what was lacking in apparent skill. The doctor joined the end game

discussion, displaying a familiarity with chess envied by several others. Several rounds of drinks followed, the doctor taking his turn buying.

Thereafter, McCoy became a familiar sight in the rec room -- playing chess, kitbittzing the games or just talking with groups of crewmen -- all earlier hostility melting under his easy affability.

♦♦♦

Kirk was encoding and sending routine messages to the nearest Starfleet facility when one piqued his interest -- an emergency request for medical supplies necessitated by an equipment malfunction. The order didn't have the McCoy touch, though the authorizing scrawl could have been McCoy's and included the captain's approval. Kirk dispatched the message, promising himself an early discussion with the doctor.

Kirk's relief was already on the bridge when a faint emergency signal was heard. There was a sinking feeling in the lower regions of Kirk's stomach as he heard a voice he knew only too well, saying plaintively, ". . . we're leaking air, and if help doesn't come soon, Captain Leo Walsh and his crew and his passengers will be beyond helping. This is the Silver Venture, Mayday, Mayday."

"Picking up emergency transmission from a passenger liner, the Silver Venture," Kirk announced, while in his mind he added, "Harry Mudd."

"Put it on audio, Lieutenant," Macey snapped.

Kirk complied and soon the entire bridge heard Harry Mudd's SOS.

". . . We are losing air and our engines are dead. Crew and passengers have little time left. If anyone hears me, I beg you, to come to our assistance. This is Captain Leo Walsh of the passenger ship Silver Venture. Does anyone hear me?"

"Helm, locate them on sensors and feed the information into the navigation console. Curtiss, open a hailing frequency. . . This is the U.S.S. Belinda, Silver Venture. We're on our way and should reach you in--"

Macey looked toward Kim, who answered, "Forty-five solar minutes, sir."

"--Forty-five solar minutes, Captain Walsh."

"Hello, Belinda. You'll be shaving it pretty close, laddie, if you want to find anybody to rescue."

"We'll do the best we can, Captain Walsh. Belinda out." Macey turned to Kirk. "Notify the captain of our diversion and tell Sickbay that we will be taking aboard survivors. Then I want you, Tarrant, and a security team to prepare to beam over to that ship and assist in whatever way you can. Tarrant is to try to repair the damage, you'll handle communications, and the security team will assist the passengers."

"Aye, aye, sir," Kirk replied and began alerting the departments and personnel involved.

Beaming over to the Silver Venture with the rescue team would give him a chance to get to Harry before he set foot on the Belinda. Getting Mudd to keep silent about Kirk's identity would require finesse. And the price of that silence would be high. Somehow Harry had to be convinced it was in his own best interest not to reveal Kirk's deception. Achieving that goal would take considerable thought and impeccable presentation -- a interesting problem in tactical maneuvering.

The Silver Venture hove into sight as an infinitesimal dot against the background of stars. As she grew in size, Kirk, Tarrant and the security detachment reported to the transporter room. Kirk was pleased to see McCoy had assigned himself to the mission. The doctor arrived carrying a disaster kit just before the rescue team was to beam over to the stricken ship. His presence meant leaving one of the security people behind, but Kirk would make that kind of trade any day.

They transported into a dining area. The air was bad. That was the first sensation registered by the boarding party -- that and the low visibility. The very atmosphere was murky with dust and fumes, testifying to the failure of the ventilation system. Kirk's team strained to see their tricorder screens.

"Life forms over that way," Kirk gestured toward the far end of the room.

"How's the air quality, Doc?"

"Livable, but barely. And, it's not going to stay this way long," he reported, scanning his own tricorder readings.

"Take the security team and get those people over to the Belinda. Jeff, you and I will see what else we can find."

As the others moved away, Jeff, his grin barely visible, asked, "Who put you in charge?"

"Macey," was the prompt reply, "and if he didn't, he should have." Kirk looked speculatively at the young lieutenant. "Perhaps you'd like to do the honors?"

"No, thanks. I'll leave the heroics to you."

They moved through the damaged ship from one compartment to another, sometimes finding survivors and notifying the rescue team, sometimes finding victims -- one a small girl of about six, still clutching her doll. She looked asleep -- as if she would open her eyes and smile at them. But the tricorder told a different, sadder story, and they left her to rest undisturbed.

A concentration of life forms ahead led them forward through several empty compartments. It was necessary to detour around a section where hull integrity had been breached, thus using up valuable time. There was a point where a safe route appeared impossible, but Tarrant had found a crawl space with sufficient atmosphere to provide safe passage.

They crawled -- on hands and knees, heads lowered lest they come in contact with a tunnel projection. Still, they managed to collect a number of bumps and bruises during the journey. Kirk silently cursed Macey for not beaming them directly to the bridge. Now, of course, the transporters were needed to evacuate the passengers and Kirk and Tarrant were forced to crawl to the bridge. And it was on the bridge where they would find Harry Mudd.

They had to phaser their way through the bridge bulkhead. The ventilation hatch was blocked by debris and there was no time to find another access point. Delay could turn the rescuers into victims. Kirk adjusted his phaser for narrow beam and, lying on his stomach, carefully aimed the weapon with what he hoped was cutting torch precision. A final spitting of the phaser against the metal, a push against the improvised hatch, and he was looking down on the bridge from near ceiling height.

The emergency lighting system failed to pierce the smokey haze which filled the compartment. The smell of burned circuits was strong enough to choke the lungs. The floor was not even visible, and were it not for the tricorder readings verifying the presence of living beings, Kirk would have "about crawled" and beat a hasty retreat. Instead, he stuck his head further out the hole and called, "Anybody awake down there?"

Silence.

Kirk squirmed further through the opening until his arms and chest were clear. He felt around the encircling smooth metal walls, searching for some kind of projection he could use to pull himself from the tunnel and lower himself to the floor. If anything useful existed, Kirk couldn't find it.

"You'll have to lower me," he told Tarrant. "I don't think I can turn around in the tunnel and I can't reach anything to use to lower myself. Just don't drop me on my head," he cautioned.

"I'll try to remember that," Jeff said as he squirmed his way forward, laying flat, his arms outstretched, hands grasping Kirk's ankles.

"Say when," Kirk called.

"Go," Jeff snapped, tightening his hold and beginning to inch up the tunnel as Kirk wiggled forward. The engineer's muscles tensed as he felt the strain of Kirk's weight on his arms and shoulders. As Kirk felt his way down the side of the wall, Tarrant was being pulled forward. He tried to brace himself against the rounded walls of the shaft, knees hugging the sides. It was not a particularly good solution and he grunted to Kirk that he find something to grab hold of or they were both headed for the floor, hair first.

"There nothing here but smooth wall. No projections -- oh, oh -- here's something. Lower me just a bit more."

The answering grunt was accompanied by a sudden lurch and Kirk dropped almost half a foot before Tarrant was able to brace himself again. Kirk managed to get his hands and most of his arms on what he guessed to be a control board. Walking on this hands to ease the strain on Tarrant, he turned his body sideways. Tensing his stomach and leg muscles, he told Tarrant to let go of his right leg. Tarrant did so and Kirk lowered it until it rested on the control panel. Then, Tarrant left go suddenly of the left leg, which landed with a thud against one of the panel projections. Kirk gasped at the sudden pain. From above, he heard Jeff's labored breathing, then a scraping sound and Jeff was calling, "You okay, Jim?"

There was an answering grunt.

"That doesn't sound encouraging."

"It's not. Do you think you can turn around?"

"In here? You nuts?"

"Ok. Wait a minute." There was more noise from below and then Tarrant felt Kirk's hands touching his own. "Come on," Kirk instructed, "Ease forward and follow the wall down with your hands and I'll try to prop you up." Tarrant's descent onto the bridge was considerably easier on both men than Kirk's had been.

Even at floor level, it was difficult to see anything through the gloom. That anyone was alive on the bridge was against all odds.

"Find the survivors," Kirk said as he detached his tricorder and began slowly scanning the area for life forms. "Over there, to your left. I'll take the ones on the right," he told Tarrant. "Then contact the ship and have them beam your group aboard."

While Kirk moved cautiously toward the life forms, Tarrant had already found members of the bridge crew and was contacting the Belinda.

"Tarrant to Belinda. We're on the bridge and have unconscious survivors to beam aboard. Are the others aboard?"

"Affirmative. You're the only ones left and we're locked on to the bridge life forms. We'll take the weakest first," Macey answered.

"One moment, Belinda." Tarrant looked to Kirk who shook his head. "Belinda, we're ready to transport."

Kirk and Tarrant moved together as the shimmering transporter beams locked onto first one group of survivors, then another. Kirk kept scanning the area with his tricorder until only two life forms remained.

"Ready?" Kirk asked Tarrant, a dim figure standing nearby.

"More than ready," was the reply.

"Belinda, two to beam up," Kirk said into his communicator.

The two officers waited for the familiar sparkle effect. Instead, from the communicator came, "Stand by, landing party, we seem to have a problem here with the transporter."

Kirk and Tarrant glanced at each other.

"What now?" Kirk demanded.

Through the murk he saw Tarrant shrug slightly. "On the Belinda anything is possible. The transporter's gone out before."

Kirk slid to the floor, sitting with his back to one of the walls. "I have a feeling this is going to be a rather long wait," he commented. "Have a seat. Best in the house and the air's better down here."

Tarrant joined him on the floor. "I could try to get the ventilation system working," he suggested, "but I'd have to crawl through all those shafts again and probably get lost."

"The engineering deck is probably a shambles. Besides, I don't think you want another crawl through the ventilation shafts," Kirk added as he rubbed a spot on his thigh which had begun to ache. "I think I got this at that last junction."

"It should have had a warning sign--beware of obstructions."

Kirk grinned. Jeff Tarrant was a good man to be marooned with, if they were indeed marooned. The tricorder had given them a time limit of two hours before the

combined effect of the pollutants in air would render them unconscious. From that point, diminished bodily functions would hasten the end. Kirk flipped open his communicator. "Landing party to Belinda. Any estimate yet on the repair of the transporter?"

"Belinda, here. Stand by, landing party." It was Macey again.

"You know," Jeff admonished, "you keep talking to Macey that way and he's not going to like you very much."
like you very much."

Kirk shrugged with a slight grin, which Tarrant couldn't see. "Macey doesn't like me now. Might as well give him a reason."

By unspoken agreement, they remained silent after that, the need to conserve their energy and the little oxygen in the atmosphere paramount in their minds.

Kirk took the time to consider the problem of Harry Mudd, now safely aboard the Belinda and how to prevent him from using the situation to his advantage. And Kirk thought he had a way — if he ever got off this doomed ship.

"Landing party from Belinda."

"Yeah," Kirk answered tossing all protocol to the wind. "What news do you have for us?"

"We should have the transporter fixed in approximately thirty minutes. You'll have to hang on that long."

"I guess we don't have much choice, Belinda. Any chance of us moving to an area with better atmosphere? Things are getting a bit thick in here."

"Negative. All other parts of the ship are inhabitable."

"That tears it," Tarrant mumbled.

"What was that, landing party?" Macey asked.

"Eh, nothing, Belinda," Kirk covered. "We were just discussing our options, which seem to be limited to sitting here and waiting until the transporter is working again."

"Stand by, landing party. Belinda out."

"Why do I have the idea Macey is enjoying this?" Tarrant asked.

"Probably because he is. I doubt I'll ever get his vote for crewman of the year," Kirk offered, "and you're probably tainted with the same brush. If we're going to get out of here, better keep the talking to a minimum. I don't trust the tricorder readings on the available oxygen. There doesn't seem as much as there was just moments ago. I'd guess that toxic fumes are leaking in somewhere." He took another tricorder reading and flipped open his communicator. "Landing party to Belinda. We're losing breathable oxygen fast. You'd better hurry."

By the time transporter beams snatched the two officers off the bridge of the Belinda, their life readings were perilously close to nonexistent. McCoy was in the transporter room with medscan whirling even as the two prone forms coalesced on the platform.

McCoy bent over Kirk first. The faint whirl of the medscanner and the hiss of the hypospray, and then McCoy was directing Kirk's removal to Sickbay. Tarrant was examined, medicated, and then he, too, was being moved to the medical facilities.

"I'll need to use crew cabins for the injured," McCoy told the first officer. "I can only handle the more seriously injured in Sickbay."

Macey glared at the doctor. "Get the Officer of the Day to arrange something. The crew isn't going to like this."

McCoy bristled, becoming very military in the process. "I'm due in surgery, Commander, and don't have time for messages. As to what the crew thinks, I don't give a damn," he snapped as he turned precisely on his heel and followed his patients to Sickbay, uncaring of Macey's reaction. The doctor's opinion of the crew's reaction was considerably higher than the first officer's.

The injured were stacked three deep in Sickbay. For the most part, the injuries were minor, caused by the foul air and requiring only inhalation therapy. These patients were quickly treated and assigned cabins and bedrest. The most seriously injured were housed in Sickbay proper. But space was limited and some of the victims were actually seated on the floor.

McCoy stepped around the prone bodies on the deck, heading for the small ICU where he had ordered both Walsh and Kirk confined. The doctor was taking no chances with Leo Walsh, nee Harry Mudd and had kept him nicely sedated until Kirk could be consulted.

The indicators on the diagnostic panel above Kirk's head measured the low levels of his body functions. McCoy had pumped him full of stimulants in the transporter room and the lungs had been evacuated. But the readings remained at the lower end of the spectrum.

McCoy ran the medscan over the prone body again, adjusted the hypospray and administered another dose of stimulant. His eyes shifted to the diagnostic panel, where the indicators began climbing to a more acceptable range as the drug took effect.

Satisfied with Kirk's response, McCoy checked the room's other occupant. Harry Mudd had come through the wreck disgustingly healthy. He was now sleeping peacefully, snoring softly in his drug induced dreams. Now and then the end of his mustache flared slightly on a particularly violent snore, an unusually comforting sound.

Whatever, McCoy wondered, was Harry Mudd doing on that ship and how could they keep him from telling all he knew about one Lieutenant James Curtiss? McCoy hoped that Kirk had devised a solution, because short of keeping Mudd sedated in Sickbay, there was no way to keep him quiet. A groan from the other bed focused McCoy's attention on Kirk, whose return to the living was apparently painful. The doctor circled the medscanner over Kirk's chest, added his own grunt to that of his patient.

One of the nurses appeared at the ICU entrance. McCoy was needed elsewhere. He motioned her to replace him.

"Let me know the minute he begins to waken," he instructed, pointing at Kirk.

She nodded, then asked, "And the other one?"

"Keep him under for now," McCoy threw over his shoulder. "His injuries can wait."

Several members of the Silver Venture's passengers and crew were in bad shape. McCoy spent several hours in surgery repairing broken bodies and several more treating the more complicated of the minor injuries.

When McCoy was finally able to return to the ICU, Jim Kirk was struggling to sit up in bed, his breath coming in shallow, painful gasps.

"Jim! No!" McCoy ordered from the doorway, quickly moving to the side of the bed and easing Kirk back. "You stay there until I say you can get up, and that won't be until those lungs heal. Hurts to breath, doesn't it?"

Kirk attempted to speak, his voice a harsh, unintelligible whisper. McCoy's ever ready medscan warbled as the doctor passed the instrument over Kirk's chest.

"You'll do," McCoy commented sourly. "But all those fumes play havoc with lung sacs and you're a mess right now. And, if you are wondering how Jeff Tarrant's feeling, he's about the same as you. I'd have him in here, but the other bed's already occupied as you can see," McCoy added with a jerk of his head towards the other bed. "Any idea what we're going to do with him?" McCoy asked, but held up a hand as Kirk tried to speak. "Just nod yes or no. I can wait for details later."

"Good," McCoy replied to Kirk's nod. "And I gather I should keep him under until then?"

Kirk nodded.

It was late the next day when Captain Cardello entered ICU, very officious and self-important.

"Well, how are our patients doing, Doctor?" he asked. "Oh, I see, Lieutenant Curtiss here," pointing in Kirk's direction. "Shouldn't he be out in the ward with the other crew people? Several of the civilians appear more seriously injured and more in need of intensive care than the lieutenant, Doctor."

"Lieutenant Curtiss' injuries are internal, primarily to his lungs and, for a time at least, extremely serious. The passengers' injuries, for the most part,

are non-life threatening. I could use another bed in here -- Lt. Tarrant's injuries aren't as critical as those of Lt. Curtiss, but as you can see, I have Captain Walsh here and the space is limited."

"Ah, Captain Walsh. And how is he doing?" Captain Cardello wasn't one to waste any sympathy on his own crew.

McCoy mouthed the time honored platitude, "He's doing as well as can be expected."

Cardello's expression hardened at the words. McCoy noticed that he clenched his hands as if controlling his reaction.

"And just what is that supposed to mean, Doctor?"

"Exactly what I said. I'm keeping him sedated until I can assess the extent of his injuries."

"Surely with the equipment at hand, his injuries should be easily determined."

McCoy stiffened slightly at the criticism. "The equipment aboard this vessel is at best antiquated. One of my recommendations when I leave this vessel, Captain, will be the complete refit and expansion of this sickbay facility. As for Captain Walsh's condition, while not terminal, he does require a period of uninterrupted rest. I have taken steps to see that he gets that rest."

Captain Walsh took this opportunity to punctuate McCoy's words with a snort. The captain moved closer to Walsh's bed, standing for a brief moment looking down on the sleeping man.

"I must question Captain Walsh concerning the Silver Venture. And," he turned to face McCoy, "I expect that to be soon."

"I can't hurry the healing process," McCoy protested.

"And I can't delay the inquiry into the accident. I expect you to see that Captain Walsh is able to assist in the inquiry," the captain replied, as he turned and left the unit.

"Fat chance," McCoy declared out loud, his hands planted firmly on his hips, his mouth twisted slightly.

"I imagine he means what he says," Kirk croaked from across the room. "And it certainly complicates our job."

"Our job? You mean, my job -- keeping the captain from finding out just how healthy yonder patient really is."

"Our job," Kirk stated hoarsely, "is to make Mudd think he's aboard the Enterprise."

"The Enterprise? The bad air on the Silver Venture must have affected your thinking. This is not the Enterprise and Harry Mudd will know that as soon as he wakes up. Just look around here!"

"I'm not so sure about that," Kirk reflected. "Consider this, Bones. If we keep Harry here and the only people he seems are you and me. . . ."

"Jim, that's crazy. He'll know as soon as he hears someone calling Captain Cardello over the intercom."

"That's part of the plan," Kirk croaked.

"Well, you're in no condition to talk about anything right now."

The wall communicator beeped. "Dr. McCoy to Ward 1, please."

The doctor walked over to the unit and punched the button. "I'll be right there."

He gave Kirk a questioning look, slightly shook his head, and left the ICU, but not before ordering Kirk to "Get some sleep, Jim, 'cause I'm going to have to release you tomorrow."

Kirk nodded and settled back on that the bed. Now that McCoy mentioned sleep, Kirk found it difficult to keep his eyes open. "Tomorrow," he agreed sleepily, denying McCoy the last word yet again.

The next day Kirk sat in his usual place in the rec room half-heartedly trying to seduce Mary Gerard, while McCoy regaled Tarrent with stories of the Enterprise. Kirk listened with one ear.

"Someday," Tarrent said fervently, "I want a berth on a starship, maybe even command one."

Before McCoy could answer, Kirk jumped into the conversation. "Starship commanders — overrated and overbearing."

"I take it you didn't get along with your last captain," Mary said and when Kirk looked at her sharply, she added. "Security. Remember? Records? Information? Access."

"Oh — and just what secrets does our Mary know about us, I wonder?" Kirk challenged. "Care to enlighten us?"

"If I tell, then they're not secrets," she answered with a smile. "And it's about time I checked my office." She got up from the table and blew a kiss at Kirk. "Perhaps next time you'll be luckier," she told him without further explanation and headed toward the door.

Kirk silently considered the young man across from him. He had known Tarrant a little more than a week. Though the young engineer had implied he knew Kirk's identity, he had never once referred to it since their first meeting. His performance aboard the Silver Venture had been first rate. Kirk's own gut feeling was that he could trust this young man who could talk of starship command with a gleam in his eye. And Kirk trusted his instincts.

He pulled his chair closer to the table and leaned forward. Speaking in low tones, he took a few minutes to brief the young engineer on his mission and to solicit Jeff's help.

"You were unlucky enough to get me for a roommate and to get stranded with me on the Silver Venture. If involved, I've blown it, and you'll alert the others and I'll become an accident statistic. But, I think I can trust you and I need your help."

Tarrant grinned. "I never expected that you'd need my help, but you've got it. Though I don't much relish spying on my friends."

"Of course you don't, but whoever is responsible is no friend of yours or anyone else. Welcome aboard."

"Jim, it just won't work," McCoy interrupted. "You can't turn the Belinda into anything other than the . . . Belinda. How are you going to convince my guest that he's not where he is, but someplace else?"

"Simple, Doctor. We'll merely try to convince him he's on the Belinda and hopefully the result will be that he thinks he's somewhere else -- at least long enough for us to complete our project."

"Huh? Could you run that by me one more time -- slowly?"

"It's simple. There's no way we could convince Mudd that he was on board the Enterprise, but going out of our way to convince him he's not on the Enterprise just might have the opposite effect."

"In other words, we work very hard at convincing him he's on the Belinda and hopefully convince him otherwise."

"Exactly," Kirk agreed. "And the curtain goes up tomorrow, Delta watch."

♦♦♦

Harry Mudd was allowed to awaken naturally the next morning. The first thing he saw clearly was Leonard McCoy studying the diagnostic screen above the bed.

"It would have to be you," Mudd complained bitterly.

"You're welcome, Harry. I appreciate gratitude when I've saved a life. Makes all the trouble worthwhile."

"Bah. Of all the ships in the galaxy I have to be rescued by the Enterprise."

McCoy was writing comments on Mudd's chart. "Not the Enterprise," he said absently, "the Belinda."

"Don't give me that, McCoy. You expect me to believe that you'd transfer off the Enterprise onto a dump like the Belinda? Next, you'll be telling me Kirk's commanding."

"Wrong again, Harry," Kirk said as he entered the ICU, belatedly pulling the red sleeve of his tunic down to cover a bit of gold underneath. Harry Mudd did not miss the gesture.

"Jamie, boy . . . and a lieutenant!"

"Very observant, Harry," Kirk replied lightly.

"And you expect me to believe you're a lieutenant on the Belinda?" Mudd was disbelieving.

"Something like that," Kirk agreed. "You know how it is -- everybody makes mistakes."

"Bah! Don't try to put me on, Kirk. I was playing that game before you were born. Now," he declared gleefully looking from Kirk to McCoy and back, "What's the con?"

"No con, Harry," Kirk shrugged. "We wouldn't try to put one over on the old master."

"Drop the old, Kirk. Just lay it out for me."

"There's nothing to lay out, Harry. I just stopped by to see how you were doing," Kirk said easily. "I'll have to get going, Harry, I have to go on duty."

"I thought the captain was always on duty."

"Captain Cardello is; I'm not. See ya, Harry," Kirk waved as he left, leaving further explanations to McCoy.

Just as Kirk was leaving, the intercom in ICU signaled and Tarrant's voice was saying, "Captain to the bridge . . . eh, Lieutenant Curtiss to the bridge."

McCoy, feigning innocence, went over to the com panel and answered. "Sickbay to bridge. He's on his way, Lieutenant. He just left here."

"Thank you, Doctor. Bridge out."

"Sickbay out."

"So," Mudd cooed, "this isn't the Enterprise. Kirk isn't captain. Bah."

"Harry, you're just going to have to take our word for it. This is the Belinda," McCoy said as he ran a bio scanner over his patient. "Hmm," he added for effect before turning off the unit.

"'Hum' what, McCoy?" Mudd said, attempting to rise. McCoy's hand pushed him firmly back onto the bed.

"You stay there, Harry. You're a very sick man."

"Sick! I don't feel sick!" Mudd replied.

"Don't you, Harry? If I were in your place, I think I'd be feeling some tingling in my fingers about now."

"Tingling? Fingers?" Mudd flexed his fingers unconsciously.

"No tingling yet?. That's good, Harry. Very good."

"What do you mean 'yet'?" Harry asked beginning to worry just a little.

"Oh, nothing, Harry," McCoy shrugged off the question. "You'll have to stay here for a bit, that's all."

"Ah, what for?"

"Observation, Harry," McCoy answered as he put the chart back into its slot, easily accessible to Harry, and headed for the door. "Just observation."

McCoy's exit was accompanied by Harry's bellow, "Observation for what? Answer me, you galactic quack, observation for what?"

On the bridge, Kirk reported for his first duty assignment since release from Sickbay. As expected, Macey was in the command chair. He acknowledged Kirk's presence with a nod, hardly looking up from the clipboard he was studying. At least Kim and Elijawan seemed glad to have Kirk back on his regular duty shift.

Kirk formally took charge of the communications console, automatically running through the orders of the day and the ship's log entries. He also took the opportunity to program several spurious messages for Mudd's "ears only" and programmed for irregular play to the ICU. The false announcements contained just enough hesitation interruptions and apparent slips to convince someone with Mudd's aptitude for thievery that all protestations to the contrary, he was indeed on the Enterprise. And if they didn't convince him, perhaps the ruse would slow Harry up just long enough for Kirk to complete his mission.

"Unidentified object at the extreme range of sensors," Kim announced from the helm.

"Have you got a fix on it?" Macey snapped.

"No, sir, still too far away -- at the very edge of the sensor range."

"Get one, and I want a visual. Communications . . . anything?"

"Negative," Kirk replied. "Scanning all frequencies . . . negative."

"Speculation, Mr. Elijawan?"

"None, sir, without more data. Whatever it is, it's not moving any closer, or any farther away. Could be pacing us, sir."

"I want more than 'could be,' Science Officer," Macey ordered. "Helm, keep on it."

The bridge crew concentrated on their individual instruments, attempting to further define the nature of the contact. But whatever it was remained at the very edge of the sensor sweep.

They were still tracing the tantalizing blip when McCoy's voice came through the ship's intercom.

"Sickbay to bridge."

"Bridge, Lieutenant Commander Macey. What do you want, Doctor?"

"Curtiss and Tarrant, as soon as they're off duty. Their lungs are not all I would like them to be."

"Acknowledged, Sickbay. . . .Curtiss, you heard?"

"Aye, sir."

"And notify Lieutenant Tarrant."

"Aye, aye, sir." Kirk knew very well the reason for McCoy's call. It was time to visit Harry again and they wanted to keep speculation about visits to Sickbay at a minimum.

The watch crept slowly towards its conclusion. At long-last the next shift began to arrive by ones and twos. As might be expected, Kirk's relief was late and his shift unnecessarily extended until the unrepentant young ensign arrived. And, he thought to himself, the Belinda goes by the book. Macey hadn't said a word to the ensign about the tardiness of her arrival.

Jeff Tarrant was lying on a diagnostic table when Kirk was finally able to end his shift. McCoy was no where in sight.

"For effect," Jeff assured him as Kirk threw an enquiring eye in his direction. "Just in case someone comes in. Actually," he added with a touch of humor, "I think it's the way the doctor gets his kicks — running medscans over patients and peering at their insides!"

Kirk grinned. The good doctor's "kicks" originated in far different laboratories than medscans. Kirk rather enjoyed the same "kicks" himself.

Kirk was settling himself on the other diagnostic bed when McCoy bustled in wearing his very best professional manner.

"Broken fingernail in Engineering," he offered by way of explanation, causing two pairs of eyes to widen in disbelief.

"He's got to be kidding," Tarrant suggested to Kirk, who shook his head.

"A broken fingernail can be a serious injury," Kirk said in a somber tone. "Female crew members have been known to cry at such times."

"But not engineering officers," Jeff countered, "they're cut from stiffer material than bridge officers."

"Touche," McCoy answered before turning to Kirk. "I think you've just been insulted, Jim."

"Engineers have always been rather blind to the superiority of bridge personnel," Kirk suggested. "Their world tends to be bordered by dilithium crystals and Jeffries tubes. I've found it best not to push the subject too far. They tend to be rather stuffy about it."

Jeff laughed outright. "Without us down below, all the orders in the world won't move this ship or any other one meter." The words demanded a reply, but Kirk held up his hands in surrender. "I wouldn't want Scotty to hear about this conversation," he told McCoy.

"I'll see that he does," the doctor assured him. "Just as soon as I see him again, if ever."

Kirk grinned ruefully. He knew the feeling well. Sometimes he felt destined to spend the remainder of his career on the Belinda. Shaking off the feeling, he asked, "Everybody ready? We have to make this short — not give Harry a chance to

question any of us very much. Jeff, three minutes from my mark." Jeff nodded, eye on his chronometer.

"Now! Kirk intoned and again Jeff's head bobbed. A final check of his colleagues and Kirk was entering the ICU, a slight smile on his face. He made sure the door was closed behind him before speaking.

"How are things, Harry?"

"Kirk -- I demand that you release me from this prison."

"Harry," Kirk admonished as he neared the bed. "You're a sick man and in no condition to be running around the ship. As soon as McCoy gives the okay, you'll be up and out. Until then, consider it a kind of vacation."

"What are you pulling, Kirk?" Harry asked, curiosity written all over him. "I saw right through that fake captain you tried to palm off on me. But I played it your way. I just can't figure out what you're up to. You're deep, laddie buck, a lot deeper than I gave you credit for. Come on, let old Harry in on it."

Before Kirk could answer Jeff was entering the unit, wearing a medical staff tunic and carrying a clip board. He nodded at Kirk, one officer to another, and addressed Mudd.

"Captain Walsh, we need to know who to notify when . . . eh, if something happens.

Harry didn't miss the intentional gaff. "What do you mean, 'when something happens'?"

"Just take it easy," Kirk told him. "Jeff didn't mean anything by it, did you, Jeff?"

"No, Jim, of course not," Tarrant agreed. Mudd's eyes widened at Jeff's use of Kirk's first name. "I'll come back later to get the information I need," Jeff stated and back out of the room, somewhat sheepishly.

"And I'd better be going, too, Harry. I hope you'll be feeling better," Kirk said, his tone indicating a false sincerity.

"Kirk, come back here," Mudd demanded of the retreating officer. "McCoy, I demand to see you! McCoy!"

The door swished shut on Harry's shouts. McCoy and Tarrant were waiting for Kirk.

"I think Harry needs a bit more joy juice," Kirk suggested. "And why didn't you tell me Cardello'd been down here?"

"Because I didn't know," McCoy snapped. "Jim, I can't be here every minute. Did Cardello blow it?"

"Apparently not. Harry didn't believe him. My opinion of Harry may have to change," Kirk admitted. "I didn't realize he was such a good judge of human nature."

"He'd have to be in his line of work."

"And what is that?" Jeff asked.

"Con man," Kirk answered.

"Then he could be working with the smugglers," Jeff suggested.

"Not Harry. Harry just can't resist doublecrossing everyone in sight, and the Klingons are most unforgiving. No, Harry's not one of the smugglers, but he might be able to get a line on who is. If we could only trust him enough to let him snoop around Starbase 8 when we get there--"

"Harry -- work with us? Jim, are you feeling well?" McCoy asked. "And I hope you're not thinking about doing any snooping around yourself."

"The thought had crossed my mind," Kirk admitted.

"And how many people, in round figures, know you at that particular starbase?"

"Too many . . ."

"Right!" McCoy agreed. "And that's why you're staying put. The real problem is keeping Harry on board. The Silver Venture passengers and crew are due to be put ashore there.

"You want to keep him here?" Jeff asked in disbelief. "I thought you'd jump at the chance to get rid of him."

"The idea of getting rid of Harry is tempting," Kirk agreed, "but I don't

think we can afford the risk. If Harry meets the wrong person at the base. . ."

"I could get him into the base hospital — several people there owe me a favor or two," McCoy suggested.

That possibility was even more tempting, but Kirk ruled that out as well. "I think we'll keep Harry with us. Call it a hunch, but I've a feeling Harry just might be able to help us with this. Of course, it would be best if everyone thought that he was transferred to the base hospital."

"Easy enough to do," McCoy agreed. "We'll just keep him where he is. No reason for anyone but me to go in there. But, you have to fix the computer so that it doesn't register his presence."

Jeff came up with that solution. "We'll just isolate the ICU from the master grid. Shouldn't take too long and since we're stuck here on board, and there'll be enough back and forth of personnel and passengers that for a while total numbers will be confused. Should be simple enough."

"Jim," McCoy protested, "it isn't safe with Harry on board. He could blow the whistle on you at any moment."

"Only if they know he's here, Bones. And what if Cardello or Macey meet him at the base hospital? No, we'll keep him with us and see that he gets a little sicker each day."

♦♦♦

The exchange of passengers and the loading of new supplies was accomplished quickly and efficiently. Crew replacements also came aboard at that time -- the Belinda always needed additional crew members. Jeff successfully tampered with the computer (with the help of Kirk's omni-access code) and Harry was kept sedated and isolated in the ICU. Within hours, the Belinda left orbit, heading for her patrol sector. Shortly afterwards, a starship arrived under the command of her Vulcan first officer. He met briefly with the base commander before taking the ship out again on the same general heading as the Belinda.

♦♦♦

"Bones, those medical supplies I ordered," Kirk questioned the next day, "-- anything suspicious about them? Any way for the dilithium to be part of the shipment?"

"Well, if so, it wasn't with the supplies I got. Not unless it was hidden in capsules. I went through it all with a scope and everything checked out as ordered."

"Anything missing from the order -- something shipped but never received?" Kirk pursued.

"All there and in the correct amounts -- order, manifest, and receipt -- all check out."

"But did you check it against the order that was actually sent, rather than the report of what was sent?"

McCoy shook his head. "The order as transmitted isn't available on my terminal. That would have to be transferred from the bridge console."

Kirk nodded. "Next shift, Doctor, you'll have your checklist. Meanwhile, I have a little excursion in mind for us, Jeff." Kirk walked over to the sickbay computer terminal. "I transferred the communications supply order to this terminal and we're off to check it out." He punched up the information and copied it his clipboard. "I haven't had a chance to check this out. Any idea where the communications gear would be stored, Jeff?"

"Probably down with the engineering back-ups."

"Good. Come on, then. You and I are due for a snooping expedition into the engineering storerooms." Kirk headed for the door.

"Don't I get to come?" McCoy asked, as Jeff slid off the diagnostic table and followed Kirk.

"You, Doctor, have a very important patient," Kirk reminded him. "By the way, how is Harry doing and what does he have?"

"Very nicely, thank you, despite his choriomeningitis. The com messages piped in from the bridge were most effective. Harry is convinced that he's on the

Enterprise. I suggest you stop in and see him before you turn in," McCoy called as Kirk headed out of Sickbay.

"And I'll just stay here and talk to myself," McCoy said with a shrug as he headed for the tiny office assigned the chief medical officer of the U.S.S. Belinda.

The bowels of any ship are forbidding. Devoid of human occupation, where sounds are magnified and echo for no apparent reason, hand-held portable lights could not dispel a gloom rooted in primal memory. Kirk felt slightly on edge and he noted Jeff inch closer, relying on herd instinct to lessen his unease.

"I remember the first time I was sent down to the storage hold pick up a spare part," Kirk said. "Hadn't been out of the Academy two months and still not sure which end of the ship had the engines. Thought I'd never make it back. We never lose our fear of the darkness, not altogether, no matter how sophisticated we become."

They remained silent after that, inspecting each hatch in turn until locating the one where Engineering stored its spare parts.

"Locked," Kirk murmured trying the door. He studied the lock for a moment. "Should be a panel around here . . . there it is." He opened the access panel, studying the maze of connections a moment. "This one, I think," he said quietly as he selected a connector, "and this one."

Kirk touched the two circuits together and the door slid open. "After you," he invited with a wave of his arm.

"I think you missed your calling. Should have been a bank robber."

"On occasion, a Starfleet officer is required to utilize a variety of skills and methods to accomplish his goals. Basic Academy Lecture #1."

"Even hot wiring automatic doors?"

"If necessary. Come on, we've got to hurry. This little exercise has probably turned up on somebody's security board."

The storeroom was far from neat, a denial of the "by the book" protestations of the captain. The disorder, however, made their search easier. The last shipment of stores were pushed over to the side, relatively close to the entrance. Quickly, the manifest was compared to the boxes, crates and the larger, unpacked engineering parts. It was all there.

"Any ideas," Kirk asked, "short of asking the opposition, that is?"

"I could rig a tricorder to register for dilithium," Jeff suggested, "but then we'd have to come back to read it. And, if the crystals are shielded somehow, then — well — you know the answer to that."

"I have unlimited faith in engineers," Kirk declared. "Come on, let's get out of here. I want to make that panel appear innocent of tampering."

Kirk was just closing the access plate when the sound of hurrying feet echoed through the corridor. He signaled Tarrant and moved as quickly and quietly as possible around the next bend of the corridor, thanking the gods of cat burglars that sound traveled so far and so loudly in the lower decks that the direction of their own retreat was indeterminate.

Less than ten minutes later, Kirk sat opposite McCoy in the rec room, absorbed in the chess pieces before him. "How's your patient?" Kirk asked as McCoy decided to move first one piece, then another.

"Trying to break my concentration, are you?" McCoy challenged. "As to my patient, he has enough joy juice in him to sleep until next week. Rest is good for what ails him." McCoy moved his knight with a flourish. "And your partner?" he asked, quite satisfied with himself.

"Ummm. Unorthodox," Kirk commented regarding McCoy's knight move. He studied the board intently, then moved his bishop, putting McCoy's king in check. "Jeff's around tinkering with some stuff. Check."

"Damn! I never saw that," McCoy complained. Intense study of the board revealed only one safe move for McCoy's king, but he would be right back in check once Kirk made another move. "Why did I ever get into this tournament," he grumbled, "and what genius scheduled me against you?"

"It could have been worse," Kirk assured him. "You could have been paired with a Vulcan."

McCoy's "humph" followed Kirk across the room as he recorded the win on the game sheet posted on the bulletin board. It would have been easier to let the computer handle tournament results, but tradition preferred the posting on the bulletin board.

Kirk's quarters were empty when he returned. He stood inside the door with a niggling feeling that something was out of place. He saw immediately that his own personnel warning signal had been dislodged — a strand of hair placed across the join of a drawer and its frame, a trick he had learned from a classic spy movie.

The searcher had been thorough and neat. Nothing had been taken and Kirk's I.D., which had its own warning signal, appeared undisturbed. Jeff would have to check his things when he got off duty. But Jeff Tarrant didn't return to quarters that night. His whereabouts on the ship were "unknown."

"Nobody knows," Kirk snapped as he paced McCoy's office early the next morning. "I even asked Mary Gerard and she and everybody else exhibits not the slightest interest in finding him." He took another turn around the small office. "It's my fault — I never should have gotten him involved."

"Jim, take it easy. It's not your fault. Don't be grave digging before you need to."

"I know, Bones, I know," Kirk sighed. "But I should have expected something like this."

"How? Did you do anything that would make you a suspect? Did Jeff?"

"I shouldn't have brought him into this, I should have—"

"What you should do is go on duty. Your watch starts in a few minutes. What was Jeff doing last night?"

"Searching Engineering storerooms with a tricorder set for dilithium."

"And probably got caught in the act," McCoy observed. "Look, you get to the bridge and leave the sleuthing to me."

"No comments about being a 'doctor', not a tracer of lost lieutenants'?" Kirk asked ruefully. The attempt at humor fell flat, and after a warning to McCoy not to get lost himself, Kirk reported for duty.

While Kirk chafed at his forced inaction on the bridge and McCoy looked for the missing Tarrant, Harry Mudd was having increasing doubts about which vessel he was really aboard. Mudd had rejected Kirk's original denials that this was the Enterprise. Where else would Kirk be on but his own ship. And McCoy's presence in the sickbay only added to the conviction. Now, Harry wasn't so sure. He had seen victims of choriomeningitis and though he did have the symptoms, the disease was acting much slower than he recalled.

And the longer he lay in his bed the more he became convinced that he was not on the Enterprise despite those intercom calls for everyone Harry had ever met on Kirk's ship. And if he was not on the Enterprise, perhaps he was on the Belinda. And, if that was the case, then why had Kirk and McCoy tried so hard to convince him otherwise. But were they really? At every turn, the two had insisted that he was on the Belinda. And, if this was the Belinda, then why were Kirk and McCoy aboard?

Harry Mudd was not one to let such questions go unanswered, especially when he smelled the possibility of making a little money out of the deal.

While Harry Mudd plotted his escape from Sickbay, Kirk was having his own problems. He had arrived on the bridge to step right into the arms of a security detachment headed by Mary Gerard.

Macey was standing before the turbolift doors, hands planted on hips, the very essence of outraged authority.

"Lt. Gerard, place Mr. Curtiss under arrest," Macey intoned.

"And the offense?" the security chief asked.

"Smuggling!"

There was a sudden murmur of voices as the bridge crew reacted to Macey's words — some surprised, some doubting, others simply stunned at the accusation.

Smugglers on federation vessels, while not unknown, were extremely rare.

"And the particulars?" Kirk inquired calmly, not surprised that Macey was taking this step. Searching the cabin was the first link in the chain against Kirk.

"I'll hand it to you, Curtiss, you're a cool one. It will be interesting to learn who you're working with."

"I thought I was working with this crew," Kirk nodded toward the others on the bridge.

Macey eyes narrowed and his nostrils flared as he glared at Kirk's flippancy, visibly controlling his anger. His lips tightened into a thin line, his eyes slits as he took several deep breaths. "You're working with the Klingons!" he spat.

Kirk waited an extra second before replying just to get to Macey a bit more. "What makes you think I'm working with anybody?" Kirk asked.

"You're not in this alone. Tarrant's in with you and maybe even the doctor," the first officer declared. "Now, again, who are you working with?"

Kirk remained silent.

"You'll tell me," Macey threatened, "before I'm through with you, you'll talk your head off."

"Couldn't you be just a little more original?" Kirk asked. "That cliché's been around for hundreds of years."

"Take him away," Macey snapped and turned back towards the command chair.

As the security guards took his arms, Kirk asked again, "What am I supposed to be smuggling?"

Macey ignored the question. He gestured again to the guards and Kirk was escorted off the bridge.

The detention area was small -- two minuscule cells, one of which was already occupied by Jeff Tarrant.

"So this is where you've been keeping yourself," Kirk observed as he waited for the forcefield of the empty cell to be released.

"Yeah, but it got to be a little lonely and I asked for some company."

"Thanks. I was tired of working anyway."

A hand in the center of his back shoved Kirk into the cell. "Hey, watch that," he yelled as he slammed into the far wall.

The security guard assumed his most belligerent pose -- chest and chin stuck out aggressively, eyes and mouth mere slits. It would have worked just fine if Kirk had been less certain that it was a well practiced sham. He had seen security types rehearsing in front of mirrors.

The guard, however, was not content with merely locking up the prisoner; he had to express his own contempt for Kirk.

"We don't like smugglers on the Belinda," the red shirt hissed.

"You've find them all very original," Jeff called from across the corridor. "Snappy sayings seem to be a strong point."

The guard glared in Jeff's direction before checking the force field, and returning to the small outer detention area.

When they were alone, Kirk raised questioning eyebrows at Jeff, who shook his head. He either hadn't found anything or hadn't had sufficient time. Either way, they were no further ahead and in fact had taken several giant steps backward.

"What's your vice?" Kirk asked.

"Oh, just a little case of honest thievery. I got caught in the storage hold and was immediately assumed to be looting the ship's medical stores. I'll leave you to guess which medical stores."

Kirk nodded. "Drug trafficking seems a bit outside your usual line, though. I would think it would be more like dilithium crystals or perhaps the secret of matter-antimatter generators or some such thing."

"Some such thing or other," Jeff agreed, before turning serious. "What are you in for?"

"Guilt by association," Kirk stated. "As your cabinmate I came under investigation and am perceived to be in your line of work."

"An engineer?"

"A smuggler!"

"How long do you think they'll keep us here?"

"Till they get tired of feeding us," Kirk suggested. "I don't really know. Depends on why we're here."

Kirk tested the bunk with his hand and then stretched out on it. "I plan to put the time to good use," he added as he closed his eyes.

"What are you doing, sleeping?" Tarrant asked impressed that at such a moment Kirk could so easily sleep.

"Have you got a better idea? Never look a gift nap in the mouth," Kirk admonished, "because you're never sure when the next chance will come."

Tarrant didn't answer, following Kirk's lead and using the time to rest.

And though apparently resting, Kirk was sorting through their options, which seemed to revolve around a daring rescue by McCoy or an equally daring and even more unlikely intervention by the Enterprise.

It was neither of these eventualities which finally occurred. Kirk had taken his own advice, drifting into a light sleep. He hadn't been aware of falling asleep, but he was certainly aware of the rough hand shaking him awake.

"Come on, you, Macey wants you." The red-shirt was pulling Kirk up as he spoke and Kirk had to resist his instinct to counter the hold. Instead, he allowed himself to be jerked into a sitting position and shook off the offending hand and got to his feet. He grinned slightly at Tarrant as he stood near the other's cell door, waiting for the escort to reengage the force field.

"Come back soon," Jeff encouraged.

"I'll do my best," Kirk replied, "you know how much I hate work."

"Quiet, you," the guard said and gestured Kirk down the narrow corridor with a phaser.

The trip to the first officer's cabin could have been more pleasant. The guard was bent on showing his superior strength and Kirk was the only one he could practice on. Mary Gerard would be given a full report, if and when Kirk was ever in a position to do so.

Macey was seated at his desk when Kirk was shown into the office. "Wait outside," the guard was told while Kirk was motioned to a seat. "Sit down, Lieutenant. This is just an informal little talk."

"Don't I even get a reading of my rights?" Kirk asked, deciding that brashness was his best approach.

"Rights? You're not under arrest. We've just had a little disagreement over your status on this ship, Curtiss. Now suppose you tell me just why you were so interested in the Belinda's supply orders -- specifically the medical and communication supply orders."

"Who says I'm interested in supplies?" Kirk replied with more emphasis than intended.

"Your partner, Lieutenant Tarrant. Perhaps you planned to send them to our friends the Klingons, who would be delighted to get their hands on Federation supplies and equipment, if for no other reason than developing counter measures. Dealing with the Klingons could be very profitable."

"I prefer others, if the truth be known," was Kirk's carefully worded yet seemingly spontaneous answer.

"Which others?" Macey jumped on the implications just as Kirk intended.

"Any others."

"Working with the Klingons might be interesting."

"And deadly."

"And deadly," Macey agreed. "But the rewards could be worth the danger."

"I prefer more manageable risks," Kirk observed.

Macey considered the man casually seated across the desk. Kirk's whole manner was one of studied nonchalance, as if nothing the first officer could say could possibly interest him. Since he had little choice, he was prepared to listen; but only that and no more.

Macey decided to try another approach.

"I wish I understood you, Curtiss. I wish I could trust you. I can't keep you in the brig, of course. I admit I was a bit premature when I had you and Tarrant arrested. I'm sending you both back to duty -- but only because I can't hold you. I've warned you before, Curtiss, keep your nose clean. There are no second chances on the Belinda. Dismissed."

Kirk snapped to attention, turned neatly on his heel, and headed for the door. As he reached it, Macey spoke again.

"Remember, Curtiss, you're under observation. Play it by the book."

That catch phrase was becoming too much of a cliché. Kirk grimaced. "By the book, sir," he intoned before leaving.

Kirk and Tarrant returned to duty amid the speculation of their colleagues and to the relief of Dr. McCoy. He had suspected that he might never see the two of them again and what, he asked Kirk, would he have done with Harry had that been the case.

"You would have thought of something appropriate," Kirk replied. "But we've been warned we're under surveillance. I've checked the communications circuits from my board. Neither the cabin nor sickbay intercoms are being monitored and they won't be." A snip here and there in the circuits assured that. Mudd was under sedation most of the time, still apparently convinced that choriomeningitis was wracking his body. McCoy was carefully injecting drugs to simulate the progressively worsening condition.

"But I can't keep this up much longer. I can only simulate certain symptoms. Sooner or later he's going to wonder why he hasn't died yet and then . . . well, you know what will happen then."

"Hopefully, we'll find what we're looking for before then. If not, we'll have to think of something else. Do the best you can, Bones."

"Right, Jim," McCoy's voice held little conviction.

A change of duty assignments had been made and Kirk and Tarrant were rarely in quarters at the same time unless one of them was asleep.

"Shouldn't you be in bed?" Tarrant asked as he came off duty. Kirk was huddled over a terminal, eyes red from staring at the screen. "Seems to me you're on duty in a couple of hours."

Kirk ignored the question. "I've been running through those supply orders again, looking for a pattern, a code of some kind, and attempting to correlate it with missing dilithium crystal shipments. And . . ." Kirk couldn't help pausing for effect.

"And you found something." It was a statement, not a question.

"And I found something," Kirk agreed. "Here it is." He pointed to the terminal displaying one of the emergency sickbay supply requisitions. "See anything unusual about that order?"

Tarrant, who hadn't had much occasion to become familiar with sickbay requisitions, said as much. "It could be staring me in the face, and I wouldn't know it," he admitted.

"Well, I've seen enough of them for both of us," Kirk said, "and this item right here is most interesting." He pointed to a crystalline compound used for headaches. "I also know something about headache remedies and I've never seen this one as a crystalline compound; it's always a tablet or capsule. I've never even seen it in powder form. And if it was needed as a powder, it could easily be made up in the lab. I've done some calculations and the orders and shipments for crystalline compounds correlate with the disappearance of dilithium crystals from various installations. And, they also correlate with 'accidents' on the Belinda necessitating emergency supply orders."

"But the Belinda hasn't had an accident this trip," Jeff pointed out as he stood behind Kirk, looking at the screen.

"We didn't have an accident because the Silver Venture provided a nice cover for the emergency supplies even though the order went out before the distress call was received. I'm willing to bet that without that call, something would have

happened to cause the Belinda to need medical supplies. This time they just didn't need the cover. Now all we need to find out is how the crystals are being delivered. And I may have a line on that soon. It would also be nice to have some actual crystals to present to the authorities."

"I thought you were the 'authorities'," Tarrant said.

"More or less, Lieutenant, more or less," Kirk said as he cleared the terminal and prepared for bed. "Put out the lights, will you? I've got to cram eight hours sleep into two."

"Aye, aye, sir," Tarrant answered briskly.

Kirk fished the pillow out from under him and threw it towards the grinning engineer. Jeff half-heartedly tossed it back. Kirk was asleep almost before retrieving the pillow.

Two shifts later, the Belinda received a priority message from Starfleet Command. The message was decoded and sent to the captain's quarters. And Kirk, who was manning the com board, was willing to bet that the message was a fake.

After an appropriate passage of time, a tense Captain Cardello arrived on the bridge and ordered a course change. There was one slight deviation from standard procedure. Macey, who now manned the navigation, initiated a long-range sensor sweep.

"Negative reading on sensors," he reported.

"Come to course 014.5 mark," Cardello ordered sharply, "warp factor 6."

"Course 014.5, warp factor 6, sir," helm answered.

Kirk swung his chair around as if to watch the main viewscreen, but doing so allowed him to observe the rest of the bridge crew. They all acted as if a routine order had just been given; a slight detour on the way to their next port, rather than a flagrant intrusion into Klingon space.

"Go to Red Alert. Everybody look sharp," Cardello snapped. "We're coming up to the line. Communications -- I want constant monitoring of Klingon fleet channels. Science -- continuous long range sensor sweeps. Anything out there moves, I want to know it."

Kirk turned back to his board as a chorus of "ayes" greeted the orders as each station contributed maximum effort to the job of remaining undetected.

"Ever been in Klingon space before, Curtiss?" Macey asked in a deceptively casual tone of voice.

"Near enough," Kirk hedged.

"We make the trip regularly, dropping supplies, that sort of thing."

"Supplies?" Kirk asked with genuine curiosity.

"The Federation is not without eyes and ears in the Klingon Empire. Occasionally they need a little help. That's why we're here."

"Quiet!" Cardello ordered and thumbed the comm switch on his chair arm. "Bridge to Engineering."

"Engineering, aye."

"Prepare to drop supply canister on my order."

"Aye, sir."

"Keep sharp; we're coming up on the coordinates. Stand by. Helm -- what's our position?"

"Five hundred thousand km from drop point and closing, sir."

"Sensor scan."

"All sensors negative, sir," Macey reported.

"Helm, continuous readouts."

"Aye, sir -- 300,000 . . . 200,000 . . ."

Kirk thought quickly. That canister had to contain the crystals. And he had to prevent the drop. There was only one way to do that. Unfortunately, such action would land him right back in the brig or worse, but that was a small price to pay to prevent the delivery of the crystals to Klingons. Behind him, Kirk heard the helmsman calling out the distance in increments of ten thousand. Cardello was once against speaking to Engineering.

"On my mark . . ."

Kirk calculated the distance to the drop point right along with Cardello, intending to cut the comm channel to Engineering the instant before the captain gave the order. At the speed the Belinda was traveling, the drop point would be far astern before Cardello knew what had happened. But Kirk was not quite fast enough. Sensors registered the release even as Kirk was cutting the circuit. He was still hunched over his station when his chair was spun around and Cardello was standing over him.

"So you are a Klingon agent after all," he stormed. "What are you doing to that board?"

"Sensors picking up a ship at long range and closing fast," Elijawan called out.

"I'll get you for this, Curtiss," Cardello hissed before leaving Kirk to the security guards and returning to this new threat.

"Helm, emergency warp speed. Get us out of this space. Science, can you identify pursuers?"

"Emergency warp speed, aye," helm replied.

"They're too far away yet, sir," Elijawan reported.

"Will they intercept before we clear this space?"

"It will be close, sir."

Cardello turned again to Kirk. "You'll pay for this," he reiterated.

"You do seem to be repeating yourself, Captain," Kirk returned mildly, hoping to goad Cardello into losing control.

"Why, you . . ."

"Shouldn't you be seeing to the safety of this ship?"

The elbow of one security guard made sharp contact with Kirk's rib cage. He gasped, then sagged slightly, the security guards holding him upright.

"Getting a reading on that ship now, sir. It scans as a Federation vessel -- a starship."

Cardello turned back to the helm.

"Federation?"

"Aye, sir. She's no longer gaining on us, but seems to be following us . . . covering our stern."

Cardello went back to his command chair, slowly seating himself. "What is a Federation starship doing out this way, unless it's a Klingon trap -- one of their own ships showing Federation configuration. I am assuming it's a trap. Arm proton torpedoes. Prepare to fire on pursuer."

"Sir, I'm getting a reading on the Federation vessel. It scans as the Enterprise," Elijawan reported.

The Enterprise. Kirk was not surprised -- he had already guessed the identity of the mysterious sensor blip. And he was not going to be taken off the bridge, not while his ship was in danger of attack from the Belinda. He tried unsuccessfully to shake off the hold of the guards. "Cardello, you can't fire on a Federation ship. You'd be committing murder."

"You seem quite concerned about that ship, Curtiss. I wonder why?"

"Proton Torpedoes armed and ready, sir."

The turbolift doors sprang upon and Harry Mudd stepped among them, demanding, "Kirk! What's the meaning of this?" He assessed the situation with a glance, and seeing Kirk in the hands of the security guards, asked, "Did they take your shiny ship away from you, Jamie lad?"

"Hello, Harry," Kirk said, resigned to his fate.

Cardello was looking from Harry to Kirk and back again.

"Kirk?" he repeated, not quite making the right connection.

The turbolift doors opened again and McCoy hurried out, took in the situation, and muttered, "Oh. Guess I'm too late."

And all the while, the helm kept calling out the distance to Federation space, while Macey's sensors continued to sweep the immediate area for hostile ships.

Kirk knew by the hold his guards had on him that they were more interested in the unfolding scene than in following their orders. He finally shook himself free

and reached the comm board. Accurately selecting the engineering channel, he flicked it open and said briefly, "Jeff, get up here," relying on Jeff to know who was at the other end and where "here" was. The two security men had Kirk in their grasp again and Cardello was once again moving in on him.

Both McCoy and Mudd were demanding information at the same time when Eljawan called out, "Sir. Enterprise is moving closer to us and . . . I am picking up a second vessel, probably hostile."

The turbolift door opened a third time, disgorging Jeff Tarrant with phaser drawn. He was quickly disarmed, but the distraction seemed to realert Cardello to the danger beyond the ship.

"Helm, lay down a barrage of proton torpedoes," he ordered. "That should delay them enough for us to get clear."

"But sir, the Enterprise . . ." Kim protested.

"I don't care about the Enterprise. Let her take her own chances."

Cardello's words echoed about the bridge, diverting everyone's attention from the viewscreen tactical to the figure of the captain who was losing control of himself and his ship. Deliberately firing on a Federation vessel was not anything the others had ever contemplated. Once again, Kirk broke free.

"Belay that order," he shouted. But, Cardello was already moving to the helm console and even now his finger was pressing the firing button.

"Too late," he gloated. "The other two ships will be occupied with each other and we can make good our escape. Could you do as well?" he challenged Kirk.

"I wouldn't have fired on a friend," he hissed. "And neither would anyone else on this bridge." Kirk turned to the crew. He had to win their support if they were to save themselves and the Enterprise as well.

"You all know what's happened. Do you want to be known as the crew who left another ship to fight off the Klingons after you had damaged her?"

Several on the bridge shook their heads, Kirk noticed, before continuing. "If we help the other ship, we'll be doing our duty and wiping the slate clean. If won't be easy, but the other ship just might not make it without us. And if we're going to get out of this ourselves, we have to do something now."

Seeing a general nodding of heads, Kirk turned to the red shirts. "Take Captain Cardello down to detention," he ordered.

"Jim," McCoy interrupted. "I think Sickbay would be more appropriate."

Kirk nodded. "Sickbay, then, and post a guard."

The security guards hesitated. After all, Cardello was the captain and this lieutenant ordering them to arrest the captain was already under arrest himself. But there was an element of command in the lieutenant's voice Cardello never achieved. And Cardello had fired on the a starship. They looked for direction to Macey, but he sat silently at navigation.

"What can I say to convince you?" Kirk asked, feeling a growing frustration as the red shirts still did not move. "Look, the ship's doctor has certified the captain as unfit for command," he looked at McCoy who nodded agreement. "Mr. Macey seems disinclined to do anything. Helping that ship escape won't change anything. Afterwards, throw me in detention and lose the key, I don't care. But let's save our fellow crewmen before you do that."

The red shirts were still undecided. "You'll surrender when it's over?"

Kirk nodded. "You can run all the checks and verifications you want then. But, hurry, time is running out fast."

"But it's mutiny," one of them exploded.

"To escort an ill captain to sickbay? To save a Federation ship? I don't see it that way."

"But, Commander Macey--"

"Mr. Macey has had ample time to have himself heard and has said nothing."

The redshirts were silent for another few seconds, then exchanged glances. If was mutiny, then they each in their own mind threw their lot with the mutineers, and hauled away a protesting Cardello.

Macey came alive then. "I'll take over," he declared, leaving the navigation

console and advancing on the center seat.

Kirk turned on him. "How much experience have you had in combat, Commander?" he demanded. "Have you ever fought a battle? Answer me, man."

"Well--" Macey hesitated and that was all Kirk needed. He turned toward the helmsman and snapped, "Status of Federation vessel?" No one paid any attention to Macey, who sputtered a bit before he returned to the navigation.

"She has slowed considerably, sir, her shields are still holding but of questionable strength. The enemy vessel is closing."

"Helm, bring us around to come in behind the starship. We will provide cover so that she can escape."

"Aye, sir."

"Kirk, you can't do this," Mudd protested.

"Shut up, Harry."

"But there is a civilian on board. Me!"

"Harry, if you want to remain on board, you won't say another word."

"If that's the way you want it, laddie buck," Mudd shrugged.

"Harry--" Kirk threatened.

Mudd spread his hands in a grudging gesture of surrender. Kirk's attention was already elsewhere. He thumbed the intraship comm switch. "This is Captain James T. Kirk," he announced. "I have assumed command of the Belinda during this emergency. My identity can be confirmed by the ship's doctor. My orders and identification will be available when the current emergency is finished. Captain Cardello is under arrest. This ship has violated Klingon space, and fired on and apparently damaged a friendly vessel who followed us into this area. I intend to provide a cover for the Federation ship so that she is able to escape. We are probably perceived by her as as much an enemy as the Klingons. Things are liable to get a bit rough. Kirk out."

The effect on the bridge was immediate. Everyone sat a little straighter, concentrated a little harder, listened a little more intently. The magic name of Kirk combined with the command in his voice had their effect. Kirk was reasonably sure that the rest of the ship's complement had reacted similarly. Even McCoy looked a bit more relaxed. If the Enterprise were to be saved, the Belinda would have to do it. In the space of minutes she became what she had always only claimed to be -- a very tightly run ship.

As the Belinda neared the disabled starship, phaser fire streaked in front of her course.

"A shot across our bow, I think," Kirk mused. "We'll ignore it, Helm, and swing around behind her."

As the Belinda kept to her original course, phaser fire again erupted from the Enterprise, this time hitting the Belinda's shields. The bridge rocked as raw energy collided with the shielding. Kirk grabbed the side of the command chair for support. "Hang on, everybody," he called out. The alternative was to be tossed about like a matchstick before the wind. The Enterprise might be wounded, but she could damage the Belinda badly enough to prevent both ships from escaping. Somehow Kirk had to get a message to his ship without alerting the Klingons. If Federation intelligence was correct, the battle cruiser's sensors were not accurate at this distance. The Klingons couldn't be certain exactly how many ships they were in the area. And Kirk had no intention of tipping them off by using subspace radio. He had to find a way to tell the Enterprise that the Belinda meant no harm without also telling the Klingons.

"Jeff, can you rig a circuit to the running lights with a switch that can be keyed to send a visual code?"

"Aye, sir."

"Go to it then. Helm, is the enemy vessel within visual range?"

"Negative, sir. Estimated time to visual -- 2.4 minutes."

Kirk nodded. "Anybody here know old style Morse code?" he asked.

"I do, Jamie boy!"

Kirk turned on Mudd. "Harry, you have a choice. You can either face a

Federation court or be cannon fodder for the Enterprise. Jeff, got that key rigged?" The sentence was punctuated by another phaser blast from the Enterprise.

"Number four shield weakened," Macey reported.

"Harry, if you value your life — I swear I'll come back and haunt you." Tarrant handed his improvisation to Kirk but was directed to Mudd instead. There was a brief exchange of instructions before Harry announced himself ready.

"All right, send this," Kirk ordered. "'Moving into position between you and pursuer. Get my ship out of there. Signed, Kirk,' and keep repeating it."

The click of the key was the only sound on the bridge as Harry translated Kirk's words into the flash of the Belinda's outside lights.

"Think they'll be able to read it, Jim?" McCoy asked. "And if they can, will they believe it?"

"Uhura can, and probably Spock. To him in particular, the last sentence should sound familiar."

Kirk had thought hard for the proper phrase — one that would absolutely identify him as the sender. He hoped that the sentence regarding saving the ship would do the trick.

The Belinda was approaching the Enterprise, preparing to swing around behind her. If his message was either not received or ignored, this was the time the Enterprise would really open up. Kirk was not the only one aware of this as the silence on the bridge was intense, with everyone straining to see the reaction of the Enterprise. Then finally, Helm was swinging the Belinda in behind the crippled starship and providing rear cover in the race to the border.

"Harry, stop sending," Kirk snapped. "Helm, distance to pursuer?"

"Five hundred thousand and closing fast."

"Time to border?"

"Forty-five seconds."

"It'll be close. Stay on your toes, everyone. Arm phasers. Prepare to come about to engage pursuer if necessary."

"Aye, sir."

Kirk found the pronunciation of the word "sir" irritating. "It is not necessary to emphasize the 'sir'," he announced.

Helm and Navigation exchanged brief glances. Just like Sulu and Chekov, Kirk told himself. There's hope for the Belinda yet.

"Enterprise is free, sir. She is swinging around toward us now — apparently ready to provide cover for us."

"Steady as she goes, Helm. Bring us in under and to port of Enterprise. Keep watching our rear. Distance to pursuer?"

"One hundred thousand and closing . . . it's definitely Klingon in configuration."

"Steady," Kirk repeated again as the bridge was rocked by phaser fire from the Klingons.

"Number four shield has buckled, sir."

"Compensate. Helm, angle the ship to protect shield four."

"Aye, aye, sir . . . Enterprise is firing, sir."

Kirk imagined that for a brief second he could feel the fire of the phasers as they streaked past the Belinda, dissipating against the enemy's shields. Helm was right. It would be close. Tension was mounting even higher on the bridge, a palpable thing, living, breathing, affecting each of the crew differently. Some accepted the challenge which would bring out the best in them. Others were defeated, retreating before a sense of panic.

Once again, Kirk's calm voice cut through stillness. "Easy. We're almost there."

Again the crew responded positively. It was one thing to be commanded by Captain Cardello, and a very different and challenging thing to be commanded by James T. Kirk, whose reputation was even now exceeding his deeds.

The Belinda streaked over the border with light seconds to spare, her pursuers slowing, then turning aside, unwilling to confront the Enterprise, or even the

Belinda, on home ground.

There was a general relaxation and smiling exchanges. The Belinda had come through and come through well.

"Open a hailing frequency to the Enterprise," Kirk snapped, drumming his fingers on the command chair arm. Now that the danger was over, he was anxious to learn the damage to the Enterprise.

The connection seemed to take forever, until at last he heard, "Enterprise, Lieutenant Uhura."

"This is Kirk, aboard the Belinda. Let me talk with Mr. Spock."

"Aye, Captain," was the immediate response. Any lingering doubts about Kirk's identity were erased by Uhura's quick recognition.

"Spock here. Are you well, Captain?"

"I'm fine, Mr. Spock. What is your status?"

"The ship has suffered minor damage to the warp engines. Mr. Scott is effecting repairs and is expected to be completed shortly. Full warp drive potential in two hours. And the Belinda?"

"Better than the Enterprise, apparently, Mr. Spock. I'll need several senior crew members to conduct an inquiry. And come yourself. Mr. Scott can take the con."

"Aye, Captain. Is there anything further?"

"No, Mr. Spock. Just get over here. Kirk out."

"Enterprise out."

Kirk got up from the command chair, motioning for McCoy and Mudd to follow him. "You, too, Mr. Macey."

"Then you really are who you said," the helmsman murmured.

Kirk stopped, turned and grinned slightly. "Yes, Mr. Kim, I really am who I said I was or I am or . . . whatever. Mr. Tarrant, you have the con. Steady as she goes, mister."

A very surprised Tarrant answered, "Aye, sir," and rather hesitantly approached the command chair.

"It doesn't bite," Kirk assured the hesitant lieutenant. "I'll be in the main briefing room. Have Mr. Spock and his party join me there."

"Aye, sir." This reply was more confident than the last.

Kirk led the way into the turbolift, leaving behind a bridge crew only now coming to terms with recent events.

"Did you realize, Jeff, who you've been rooming with?" Lt. Watanobi at navigation said in awe.

"And," Jeff added, "just who I shared detention with?"

"And were almost asphyxiated with?" this from Lt. Kim.

"Do you think a somebody like him would confide in a nobody like me?" Tarrant asked with more than a hint of self-mockery in his voice.

"Yea, I see what you mean," Watanobi agreed and concentrated on his board, speculation neatly turned aside.

In the briefing room Kirk paced back and forth, arranging his presentation of evidence in the case. Was Cardello a fool or a traitor? Or perhaps Macey was the one Kirk sought?

If only there was some kind of hard evidence. A crystal or two might be nice, and preferably with someone's finger prints. What we have, Kirk told himself, is a very nice house of cards which one very small, irrefutable piece of information will tumble and I'll be hanging out on a limb while Cardello or Macey saws off both ends. Of course, there was always Harry, but even Kirk didn't believe him.

"Jim, sit down," McCoy urged. "That rut you're treading in the floor will be through the deck if you don't stop. You might spend the time before Spock gets here changing uniforms. He might not recognize you in red."

"Or in lieutenant's stripes," Kirk suggested and shrugged.

"Kirk," Mudd began advancing on his target, chest out, moustache twitching.

"Perhaps we could make a little deal before the others arrive. You have a problem and I might have a solution -- for a price, of course."

"Of course," Kirk agreed with a grimace. Dealing with Harry always involved "a price."

"Perhaps a statement from me concerning your cooperation with the investigation?" Kirk suggested.

"Oh, I think you can do better than that, Jamie boy."

"Okay, Harry, name your price and we'll see."

"I can see the wheels turning, laddie buck," Mudd said expansively. "Figuring out what I know and what you know I know and what I know you know -- but you don't know the half of it." Harry tilted back his chair, rested one foot on the table edge, and then crossed the other leg over the first, not a care in the universe and clearly feeling in command of the situation. "I can give you -- for a price, of course -- the name of the contact supplying the crystals. The source, Jamie boy, think on that for a minute. Anytime you're ready to deal--"

"All right, Harry, what do you want in exchange?"

"Jim, you can't," McCoy started, but Kirk stopped him with a wave.

"Hush, Bones, I will if I have to. Harry?"

"Not much, Kirk -- a full pardon -- wipe the record clean, so to speak. And a ship, of course. That doesn't seem like too much for a genuine supplier of dilithium crystals, now does it?"

"Harry, you know I can't--"

Mudd's feet and chair hit the deck with simultaneous thuds. "It's the only offer you'll get, Kirk. Take it or leave it."

"Harry--"

"All or nothing, Kirk." Harry, once more jovial, propped his feet up. "You have a little time, Jamie lad. Just don't take too long. I'd like to be on my way as soon as possible."

"No deal, Harry."

"Suit yourself," Mudd commented with a shrug. "If you change your mind--"

"No way, Harry. Not at that price. And," Kirk snapped, "get your feet off the table."

"Well, if you feel that way about it," Mudd rather pouted, "I'll have to up the ante on my little bit of information."

"Shut up, Harry," Kirk said with deceptive mildness.

Mudd shrugged again, starting to once again put his feet on the table. Kirk's eyes dared him to repeat the gesture and Harry settled back into his chair. He held all the cards and he knew it. Kirk would have to come to him. Harry was content to wait and plan just how he would extract even more from Kirk before divulging what he knew. And Harry, when he chose, could be very patient, especially when there was a load of credits waiting as a reward.

Kirk resumed pacing only to be interrupted by Mary Gerard's arrival, phaser drawn with a security detachment behind her. Macey, silent up until now, stepped forward.

"Arrest that man," he demanded pointing at Kirk. "He's holding the captain prisoner in Sickbay."

"So," Kirk turned to the first officer. "Why are you so anxious to get rid of me?" A quick glance at Harry throwing his hands in the air in resignation and silent appeal, confirmed Kirk's growing suspicion.

Macey, determined to take advantage of the fact that Kirk still wore lieutenant's stripes, pressed his claim.

"I'm the ranking officer here and I order you to release me," Macey snapped, "and put the rest of these people in detention."

Mary Gerard looked from Macey to Kirk and back, finally turning to Macey as the apparent ranking officer in the room. "Sir, as the most senior officer present--" she began.

The opening of the briefing room door coincided with Gerard's words. Heads turned to the newcomers, only the security guards ignoring the entrance aside from quick glances towards the door.

"Tell them who Jim is," McCoy demanded of the officer leading the small group.

"Surely Captain Kirk has already done that, Doctor," Spock said and then then turned towards Kirk. "Captain?"

With a satisfied grunt, McCoy turned to Macey. "Independent corroboration."

Macey's reaction was totally unexpected. Kirk detected anger as well as fear in the man. That's the key, Kirk told himself, get Macey angry and keep him there.

Mudd, on the other hand, looked disgusted. McCoy was inordinately pleased with himself. And, Kirk, seeing what one of the Enterprise crewmen carried, grinned.

"Mr. Spock, gentlemen, welcome to the Belinda," he said with an all-encompassing wave of his hand. "I believe you know Mr. Mudd, and of course the good doctor. That gentleman over there is Commander Macey. And if that canister contains what I think it does, Mr. Mudd and Mr. Macey are not going to be pleased, although for vastly different reasons. Mr. Spock?"

"The canister appeared on our sensors after it was dropped by the Belinda. It seemed expeditious to retrieve it."

"Extremely expeditious, Mr. Spock." Kirk turned toward Macey. Gambling that he had guessed correctly, Kirk was prepared to run a bluff. "Mr. Macey, I think there'll be little trouble proving your complicity in the smuggling operation. Once the truth comes out, I expect that several members of the Belinda's crew will want to step forward. And I have little doubt that your source will also be located with or without Harry's help. Somewhere you'll have slipped up and we'll find the mistake. Nobody feels kindly towards Klingon agents, especially when they've betrayed their oath to protect the Federation. You've been willing to sacrifice this crew to your own greed. Out here, there are no second chances. Each of us relies on others to do their jobs to the very best of their abilities. Only that way can any survive. But you, Macey, have deliberately risked the lives of the members of this crew. You took advantage of a sick captain, faked the messages and sent this ship into Klingon space time and time again. Your actions endangered millions."

"I endangered no one," Macey blurted out. "This ship was safe because it was in the Klingon's best interests to keep this ship safe."

Satisfied, Kirk motioned toward the security guards. "Take him away. We don't need him here."

Macey was pulled from his chair with more force than was reasonable to the task, Kirk's words finding fertile ground with the security guards.

"Now, gentlemen, shall we proceed to the matter of Mr. Mudd and his involvement in the current situation and his apparent fraudulent captaincy of the Silver Venture?"

"Kirk, I can explain everything," Mudd began.

"I certainly hope so, Harry," Kirk agreed.

Mudd was ushered out, also headed for Detention. It would be a bit crowded down there.

"Jim, how did you know?" McCoy asked. "I thought it was Cardello."

"Cardello didn't have the character strength. He was more concerned with image and in saving his own hide. In reality, he could hardly run the ship, let alone mastermind a smuggling ring."

"He could have been throwing dust in your eyes."

"Perhaps, but Macey's role was always the decisive one on board. That, plus the fact he wanted the captaincy and didn't have it. And, had to serve under a man he held in contempt — well, what better way to get back at Starfleet and the man who held the position he coveted than to use the fleet vessel of the man he hated as the instrument of his revenge. Making a little money on the side was a bonus. But I think he wanted Cardello to take the blame for it all and then he believed he'd be given command."

"But he won't," McCoy stated.

"No, and probably he never would have risen to command. But, you never can tell."

"What I can't understand is why he didn't press his challenge when you took

over. He could have won it right there, but he went back to his station."

"I think for once he knew he couldn't get the job done and acted on that knowledge. The desire to live is a very strong human urge. Also, there was the possibility that if we got out that he could always bring mutiny charges against me." Kirk turned towards his first officer. "How are repairs coming?"

"Proceeding, Captain." Spock couldn't seem to take his eyes off the captain's red tunic.

"Like this, do you?" Kirk asked.

"Negative, Captain. It is not your . . . color."

"Thank you, Mr. Spock. I'll remember that in the future."

Several hours later, Kirk was back on the Belinda's bridge, preparing to turn over command to the chief engineer, Lieutenant Li. Tarrant was present, as were several other of the rec room gang. On the main viewscreen, the Enterprise hung among the stars.

"It's difficult to believe that you're her commander," Jeff said pointing toward the screen.

Kirk smiled. "'A poor thing, but my own'," he quoted.

"Poor — ha!" That was McCoy, who had arrived on the bridge unannounced and as usual, unrequested.

"Strickly a quote from the Bard, Bones," Kirk answered. "She's far from 'a poor thing'," he added with a hint of the gleam of possession in his eye. "Jeff, I hope your next roommate doesn't get you in as much trouble."

"Trouble? Nothing like this has ever happened on the Belinda before." There was general laughter at his words. The Belinda would never recover from the tour of duty of one Lieutenant Curtiss.

"Mary, the prettiest security chief in the fleet, if you're ever where I am," Kirk suggested, "look me up."

"A pleasure, Lieutenant— ah, Captain."

"The pleasure will be mine." Kirk turned to Lieutenant Li, who was just arriving from the turbolift. McCoy, Tarrant and the others took advantage of the lift's presence to depart, leaving only Kirk and the bridge crew behind.

The formal words of transfer of command were uttered and Kirk was free to leave. With a grin and most uncaptain-like wave, he did so, anxious to get back to the Enterprise and his own crew.

He was in the corridor leading to the transporter room when a voice behind him called, "Lieutenant!"

Kirk didn't hesitate or slow a fraction. The voice called out again, "Lieutenant!" This time he paused and was told, "Yes, I'm talking to you, Curtiss."

Apparently not all members of the Belinda's crew had heard the news. Kirk executed a precise, military turn, as required on the Belinda and came to where Lieutenant Davis was struggling to move a rather large crate into his cabin.

Kirk smiled to himself. It was Davis who had greeted Lieutenant Curtiss on board that first day in the transporter room.

"Help me with this," Davis ordered. "Ship's services took the anti-gravs with them when they dropped this off."

Deliberately, I'll bet, Kirk said to himself. Davis was not a very well liked officer.

Between the two of them, they manhandled the crate into Davis' quarters where it almost filled the tiny cabin.

"That's all, Curtiss," Davis dismissed him with a curt nod.

"The name is Kirk . . . James T. Kirk . . . Captain James T. Kirk."

The last words Kirk heard as he headed toward the transporter room was Davis' voice saying "But, but—" to which Kirk hurriedly added, "But I'm glad to get out of here and back home and out of this red tunic!" and he walked a little faster in case somebody somewhere might change their mind.



to Love Again

by Deborah Grey

Christine stared at her face in the mirror. What is wrong with you? she asked herself. You've never made as many mistakes as you have these last few days -- dropping bottles, misplacing things, forgetting Dr. McCoy's instructions and having to ask him to repeat himself. Not to mention being late with scheduled meds and even filling a hypo with the wrong antibiotic. She shuddered, closing her eyes and crossing her arms to ward off the cold chill that enveloped her. Ensign Temple would have died if she hadn't caught her error; he was violently allergic to all forms of amoxycillin. That mistake had shocked her into startled awareness of how distracted she had been lately.

Well, she asked herself again, what have you got to say for yourself? In her mind a darkly familiar visage with soaring eyebrows above enigmatic eyes took shape and a small voice whispered, You know what's wrong, Christine, why don't you admit it?

Yes, she knew what was wrong. The memories welled up, slowly at first, then faster and faster, every detail as clear as if it had happened just five minutes ago. She remembered when she had first begun to feel something for the Vulcan first officer. It was when the Enterprise had been in orbit around Psi 2000 and Lieutenant Tormolen had brought that strange disease aboard, the one that forced its victims to reveal their hidden selves. It had affected her, too. She had been so lonely for Roger, so unhappy, that it had been natural to turn to the human Spock, who reminded her in so many ways of Roger. She remembered saying that she loved him and a scene that could have been excruciatingly embarrassing, except for Spock's kindness and understanding. Even in the midst of his own torment and shame, he had understood that she was merely transferring her emotions from Roger to him and that she was forced to do it by the disease. Although she could never tell him, she was grateful that he had handled the situation so delicately.

Later, when Roger killed himself on Exo III, Spock's dignified presence had helped her maintain her own dignity and pride through a ghastly time. The paperwork, the testimony, and the interviews would have been unendurable without his silent encouragement. She momentarily relived one interview that had been so shattering that she had almost broken down. Afterwards, Spock had brought her a cup of coffee and talked trivialities until she had calmed down. For months afterward, he alone had understood that she didn't want sympathy and had always been there when she needed a friendly, but silent, presence. As her heart had healed, the friendship she felt for the Vulcan had ripened slowly into love.

She opened her eyes to see her lips curving in a tender smile. "I love you, Mr. Spock," she said softly. A muted chiming drew her attention to a baroquely

antique clock on the desk. It was time for her to report for duty and she stood, smoothing the short uniform skirt.

In his office, Dr. McCoy stared into the blank computer screen, drumming his fingers on the desktop. What in space is wrong with Christine Chapel? he wondered grumpily. Three times yesterday he had had to repeat orders and she had handed him the wrong instrument twice. At odd moments during the day he had caught her staring off into the distance, a dreamy expression on her face. It had taken her so long to get the hypo for Ensign Temple that he had begun to suspect that she was daydreaming in a corner somewhere. He frowned, wondering if she was suffering some delayed reaction to Roger Korby's death. He didn't think so, but to be on the safe side he decided to review her last psycho-scan to see if he had missed any indication of unresolved grief. The sickbay door slipped open and Chapel walked in. "Good morning, Doctor," she said, smiling happily.

"Good morning, Christine," he answered, "how are you today?" He hoped his concern didn't show on his face.

"I'm just fine," she answered, walking across the office to the coffee dispenser. She poured herself a cup and turned to face him, "I just feel happy today, like something good is going to happen. What about you?"

"Oh, I'm fine, too," he replied, "ready to go." He stood, "We'll do rounds first, then I want you to help me with a drug inventory. We'll be putting in at Starbase Six in three days and I want to re-stock the pharmacy then."

"Sounds good to me," Chapel answered, "I had noticed we were low on some things and was going to suggest an inventory today." She put down her cup and started out the door, "I'll get the charts and we can begin rounds."

By the time they had finished the inventory, McCoy had changed his mind about checking her records. Chapel had been attentive and alert all morning, back to her usual serene self. He decided that her strange behavior had merely been a passing mood. He was sitting in front of the computer screen checking the final inventory when the wall communicator whistled for his attention. "Dr. McCoy to the transporter room immediately!" it announced abruptly. "Shore party beaming up with critical injuries! Dr. McCoy to the transporter room immediately!"

"Damn!" he swore, leaping from the chair to slap the transmit button. "On my way. McCoy out," he snapped. He turned to see Chapel standing in the doorway. "Grab the emergency kit and follow me," he told her.

"Right," she answered tersely, opening a cabinet. They left Sickbay quickly and sprinted for the turbolift.

They arrived in the transporter room just as the shore party materialized on the platform. Spock sagged between two coughing ensigns while the remaining members of the group sank to their knees, choking and gasping for breath. "What happened?" McCoy demanded, reaching for his tricorder.

"Some kind of poison," one ensign gasped through blue lips. "Get Mr. Spock first," she wheezed. "He's not breathing at all and I think his heart's stopped." She doubled over in a coughing fit.

McCoy ran the tricorder over Spock's ominously still form. The ensign was right, his heart had stopped but not from poison -- this was a massive allergic reaction. His throat was swollen shut and the major bronchial tubes were in spasm. "Nurse, 100 cc. Vulcan T-factor in the cardiac muscle stat and hand me a scalpel." He tipped Spock's head back and palpated his throat, feeling for the tracheal cartilage. He found it, then tilted Spock's head slightly to better expose the trachea. He stuck his hand out for the scalpel. When it wasn't slapped into his palm immediately, he looked up at Chapel.

She was frozen in place, her face white, staring at Spock, whose face was paler even than hers. In the multi-seconds he watched, a hundred expressions showed in her eyes: grief, anger, love, despair, hope. Oh, my God! he thought, so that's it. He glanced quickly around to see if anyone else had seen what he saw. No one had noticed. "Christine!" he hissed. Startled, she looked at him, seeing at once that he knew her secret. "The T-factor and a scalpel!"

"Yes, Doctor." She fumbled at the emergency kit with suddenly clumsy hands.

She handed him the scalpel, then filled the hypo. "Please, please don't let him die," she whispered as she knelt to administer the injection.

"I won't, honey, don't you worry about it," he answered softly.

Later, in Sickbay, he entered the ward to see Chapel standing silently by Spock's bed. He walked over to her side. "He's going to be just fine, you know," he said quietly.

"I know," she answered, "but I was so afraid today, I just had to see him again."

"Come into my office, Christine. I think you need a little drink about now. I know I do." Silently she followed him and sat down at the desk, accepting the glass of brandy. "Well," he drawled, "want to tell me about it?"

She looked at him over the rim of the glass, "What is there to tell? I love him."

"You love him," McCoy repeated. "Do you think he loves you?"

She smiled at him, "Of course not."

"Do you think he ever will love you?" McCoy asked her.

"I don't know," she answered, "but it doesn't matter."

"What do you mean, it doesn't matter? Do you know what you're letting yourself in for?" the doctor demanded. "If you're thinking of a Vulcan-Human marriage -- well, he's no Sarek and you're no Amanda. Don't do this to yourself, Christine. I don't think you're strong enough emotionally to handle another rejection. As your friend, I'm asking you to turn it off before it's too late."

"Don't ask me to give up the first happiness I've known since Roger died," she protested.

"Happiness? Loving a man who doesn't love you?" McCoy was incredulous.

Christine sighed, "You don't understand. After Roger, I was so empty, so alone, and I wanted it that way. Then, later, I wanted to feel and I couldn't. It is so wonderful to feel again. Right now I don't need to be loved, just to love, to experience some feeling again. And that makes me happy."

"I see." McCoy considered for a minute. "But what if--"

"Don't worry about 'what if'," she interrupted. She put her glass down and stood, taking his hands in hers. "If it ever comes to 'what if', I'm sure I'll know what to do." She smiled, "And so will Mr. Spock."

Dirge for Apollo

The lonely sun god mingles
With the dust of bygone ages,
Crying out to grown-up children
Who don't need him anymore.
The laurel leaves go ungathered
By his ungrateful children,
Who watch as he is dying
As his brothers died before.

Does no one mourn the passing
Of one who loved his children?
Have all so soon forgotten
One so worthy of their sorrow?
Can they spare no tears for tribute
And afford no sighs to honor
The last of those who gave them
Their promise of tomorrow?

— Elaine Sheppard

not quite paradise

by kim knapp

They were walking together, arms around each other's waist, heads close. Their voices were low and intimate.

Christine Chapel looked away, a weary, frustrated anger showing plainly on her visage. Gradually, the couple's words became distinct.

"Where I come from, there are two moons, a big one and one that circles the planet in three days. The stars at night ..."

"No, Stan, let's not wait! Let's get married now! That colonist Elias, he would do it! I know he would."

"No beautiful ceremony for my love?"

Christine shook her head violently. Their words were lost for a second in a high-pitched humming which disappeared almost as soon as she became aware of it.

"When we get married, I want--"

"You mean if we get married!" The girl's voice was higher-pitched now, almost shrill.

"What do you mean if we get married? Three minutes ago you wanted to hunt up the local authorities!"

"Not as long as you get jealous when I'm around other people, Stan. I'm tired of you coming around and getting so possessive when I'm just talking to someone! I work in Engineering for godsakes, and it's mostly men down there!"

"Don't I know it! You're always makin' eyes at that Wininger creep, and him trying to suck up to you whenever my back is turned...."

"Well, I can take care of myself, Stanley Munson! This isn't the 21st Century, you know!"

"I never said it was! I'm not trying to run your life, just--"

"You're just wanting to let me see who you approve of, and no one else."

"Well, maybe you should let me decide things like that! You don't have the best taste in friends, you know."

"Just what's that supposed to mean?" By now they were shouting at the top of their lungs, and Christine could hear shouts of anger and sounds of fighting from other directions.

"You know damn well what I mean! You've been hanging around that ensign who got caught bring contraband on board!"

Christine heard the sharp sound of a palm connecting sharply with a cheek. Her curiosity got the better of her and she turned around to see a tall young man holding a hand to his face, partially obscuring a look of comic surprise. His companion was nowhere to be seen.

Now she could hear the sounds of a wildly enthusiastic audience egging on a fight. Resignedly, Christine patted her tree trunk and stood away from it, knowing that she'd probably be needed when it was over.

"Christine!" It was McCoy, coming from behind a nearby building, Sulu in tow. "You okay?"

She nodded passively. "I'm fine. Mostly tired, I think. When those spores let go, they leave a real lethargic let-down."

He nodded in sympathy. "I know. You don't happen to have a communicator on you, do you?"

"No. I never thought I'd need one." Christine bit her lip. Even referring to the whole thing was painful. McCoy uncannily perceptive, looked at her carefully.

"What's wrong?"

"Not now, Leonard. Maybe later, huh?" More and more people were approaching the beamdown site and Christine, desiring only solitude, felt its lack acutely.

"Here comes someone now," she heard, and turned in time to see Captain Kirk solidify from a shimmer of gold.

"Everyone all right?" he called out. The crowd silenced sheepishly. "You've all felt the spores, and by now you've felt their absence as well."

A murmur of assent filled his pause. "Oh, my aching fist," someone called out, and the group laughed nervously.

Kirk smiled. "Now let's get back to work. There won't be any individual reports made of this, since it hit all of us. So just be patient, we have to make sure we're all here, and we'll get you beamed back aboard as soon as possible." He looked around. "I'll need the senior bridge crew, Mr. Scott, and Dr. McCoy."

"Coming," McCoy sang out, and moved forward through the crowd. He held onto Christine's wrist and pulled her along. Scotty and Sulu were beamed up with them, after McCoy's insistence that he would need Christine's help in the sickbay.

They walked down the strangely empty corridors together after leaving Sulu in the turbolift.

"Thanks, Leonard," Christine said quietly, listening to the quiet echo of their footsteps.

"I could see that you didn't want to stay there any longer than necessary," he replied.

"Why would you think that?" she asked archly.

"Honey, I've known you long enough by now to be able to read you pretty accurately. It's very clear that you didn't have the best of times down there." They reached his office and he guided her inside. "Care to talk about it before the rush gets here?"

Christine settled into a chair, avoiding the doctor's eyes. "Leonard, you really don't want to hear this. We'll be swamped with black eyes and sprains any minute now, from some of the fights I heard down there."

"Talk to me," he insisted.

She sighed, her shoulders slumping. "I was so happy at first. It was health, clean air, being with people that I loved, feeling good--feeling optimistic."

"About Spock?" His voice was quiet.

Christine nodded miserably.

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"If this is another dead end..." she muttered, brushing a wisp of hair from her forehead. She was on her own time now, working on a personal research project that she had carried on board with her the first time she set foot on Enterprise, almost two years ago. She shook her head impatiently, trying to dismiss the errant thoughts. Two years, and what?

The first serious love of her life had ended with the finding of only the horrible simulacrum of Roger Korby. And the second man she had been compelled to love was inherently unable to return it, whether he would or not. She shook her head again, flipping the obtrusive strand of hair back into her eyes. "Damn." This was getting her nowhere.

"Nurse Chapel," a voice said lazily behind her. Christine jumped, startled. She hadn't heard the door to the lab open. She set her pen down stiffly, only deliberate control preventing it from snapping loudly on the counter top. "What is it?"

"We found this plant groundside; we thought you'd like to see it." The voice was slow, almost lethargic.

Christine hadn't known they were allowing shore leave parties on Omnicron Ceti, she'd thought this was a rescue mission. She sighed deeply. "This is Bio-Research. They'll want it in Xeno-Biology."

"You really should see this." A second voice had spoken, the words drawling.

The same too-relaxed quality in the voice registered on Christine's internal alarm system. She looked up --

-- into a faceful of pale powder ejected by a spiky-leaved orange-red blossom. The voices belonged to two junior ensigns, Harriman and Jenkins, who smiled gently at her as she gasped and sputtered, waving ineffectually at the tiny white particles that showered her face and shoulders. "Enjoy it," Jenkins said pleasantly, and the two left the room with the plant, apparently in search of other 'unconverted.'

Christine's irritation had faded into...relaxation. Contentment. Peace. Perhaps even nirvana. She almost-heard a tiny thought that assured her of health and happiness, and knew somehow that it would be the only communication she would have with the spores that shared her body. The benign parasites would have her as host -- and would be good caretakers.

Christine stood, leaving her forgotten research behind, and smoothed her lab smock. She joined the line outside the transporter room and waited contentedly for her turn. They were all family now, there were no strangers among them. The spores gave them all a sense of deep, far-reaching kinship. It was not necessary to mention it, but it was felt and shown in the glances exchanged between them, the warm smiles, the frequent affectionate embraces.

After Christine's turn had come to beam down, she wandered aimlessly away from the transport site, gently declining several offers of companionship. She inhaled deeply, appreciating the clean smell of natural, unprocessed air. The ship's air smelled processed after every shore leave, although the engineers and life-support specialists did everything they could to make it smell natural. No matter. The fresh, sweet air here would fill her, would always sustain her.

She loosened her hair, pulling the tightly bound strands from their restraining clips, and enjoyed the rare feeling of her hair's weight on her shoulders and back. The cool breeze lifted the ends, caressing her scalp, and she tossed the pins away.

She leaned against a tree and pulled off her boots. "Ah...." Grass beneath her feet, supporting, now and then tickling. She wriggled her toes in pleasure, then tossed the boots after the hair clips.

She allowed her hands to explore the rough texture of the tree's surface, delighting in the natural irregularities of the bark. This place was good; it felt good. She hadn't felt this free since Psi 2000. A shadow crossed her face briefly, as the spores guided her away from it. But not from the subject -- Spock.

He would be here, would be enjoying this. She paused struck by the thought. Yes, even Spock would enjoy it here, feel free to be happy, to take pleasure in the natural beauty here. Christine decided that of all her family, the Enterprise crewmembers, she wanted to share her joy with Spock.

She had no idea where he was, but she wandered about, knowing that sooner or later she would find him. There was all the time in the world.

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Laughter attracted her attention. It was a woman's laughter, released from the inhibitions of society and demands of civilization. She didn't recognize the voice, and thought that perhaps it was one of the colonists. Someone who might know where Spock was.

A stormy-looking Captain Kirk brushed out of the bushes and past her, almost

knocking her off her feet. "Captain...." Christine began but Kirk was gone. He didn't seem as happy as the others she had seen, but she knew he was a complex man, and moody in the extremes. He would return, she knew it.

She peered through the small gap in the shrubbery through which Kirk had stepped, looking for the source of the laughter and saw a woman in utility coveralls. She was blonde, small -- beautiful in a way that Christine could never hope to be. (The spores gently erased the thought before she could dwell on it.) She was laughing at something that her companion had said, and Christine felt her throat constrict. Spock! He was leaning back against a tree, reclining, and a smile of pure relaxation and joy showed on his face.

He had responded to the woman's kiss, and now he pulled her down beside him, pointed up at the sky. The woman looked up as well, and they watched the shaping clouds pass overhead for a time.

Christine could not breathe. She felt a tide rising in her, a strong wave -- something. Jealousy -- a red wall of fury -- shame at thinking that Spock would want her to be there, would welcome her. She felt dizzy, and faded back through the shrubs in the direction she had come. She had never before considered the possibility that Spock would have a relationship with a woman from his past -- and the chances of that same woman being here astounded her. But here she was. She felt an anguish that was not all hers, an unheard wailing and a feeling of sudden emptiness, as though something within her had died.

The spores. She was no longer caught up in the euphoric sensation that they had bestowed upon her and she realized that her reaction to Spock and the woman had destroyed them.

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"I never thought -- I never once considered that he might have had -- anything -- with someone -- certainly not a Human woman --"

McCoy nodded knowingly. "Leila Kalomi."

"Is that her name?" Christine asked, feigning disinterest. She could not prevent a certain amount of bitterness from making itself heard in her voice.

"It doesn't matter. Go on."

"There's nothing more to say," she whispered, clenching her jaw in an effort to keep her eyes from filling. "When the spores died, I walked around for a while, avoided those damn plants, and went back to the beamdown area." She tried to smile. "I did manage to stay out of the fights." Her control deserted her and tears began to slide quietly down her cheeks.

"Chris, I'm so sorry," McCoy said, handing her a box of tissues. "I wish -- damn. There's our first customer now."

Christine blew her nose and smiled raggedly. "I'll put on a show you won't believe," she said, in response to his questioning look. "I'll be okay."

He smiled. "After we get the worst out of here, you go find some shoes. I don't want those feet getting cut."

She stood up and was surprised when McCoy came to her and hugged her, hard. For a moment she leaned on his shoulder, accepted his caring support, then pulled away.

She looked up at the waiting patient. "That guy's got a helluva black eye and probably a broken bone in his hand," she said clinically, her voice cracking. "Come on."

She followed McCoy into the reception area of the sickbay. There would be no problem about her surviving this. She would. She always did.



Confrère

by Jane Land

The chronometer on her desk read 01239, but Christine Chapel stared at the numbers without seeing them. It wasn't until the numbers blinked softly and changed to 0140 that she blinked too and became aware of the time. 0140. The middle of ship's night, and long past time for her to be in bed. She was in a curious state, simultaneously exhausted and wide-awake, badly in need of rest and unable to make herself take it.

She stood and stretched. There was no real reason for her to stay. She had been off-duty for hours. Leonard McCoy had gone to a well-deserved rest, but Sickbay was covered. There were three other nurses moving quietly about, and for her to be still sitting here was ridiculous. It was tantamount to saying that she didn't trust the nursing staff that she had helped to select and train. Her three recovering patients were all sound asleep. They had been lightly sedated, and none were likely to wake before morning.

Christine listened for a moment to the muted beeping of the monitors measuring heartbeat and respiration. All normal, she thought, her practiced ear easily sorting out the two quick Vulcan heartbeats from the slower human rhythm. Maybe that was why she didn't want to leave. The steady sounds were reassuring. She had a superstitious feeling that if she couldn't hear the monitors, they might stop. She shook her head impatiently. What Spock would think of that piece of illogic...

Her feet were swollen from too many hours of standing, and her boots felt impossibly hot and tight. She pulled them off. She would allow herself to check her patients one last time, and then she would go to bed. A fine lot of use she would be tomorrow if she didn't get some rest. A hot shower might help her relax enough to get some sleep. She did a quick calculation. Yes, she still had enough of her weekly water ration left. She never had learned to like sonics. The stickiness of fatigue and stress would yield best to old-fashioned soap and hot water.

James Kirk was the only one of the three still left in the main recovery ward. She went over to him first. Asleep, he had the little boy look that he sometimes got when he was relaxed, in the moments when he let the responsibility of command ease a bit. She grinned at him fondly, checking he bandage over the healing knife wound in his back so deftly that he barely stirred. Awake, he was always in charge of any situation he was in, always doing the best for his crew and his ship. She remembered gratefully the quip he had made when coming back to consciousness earlier that day. That was a good example. It had been for Leonard and for her; he had been instinctively trying to reduce their tension. She hoped that the man with the sledgehammer would let him rest now. Sleeping, he appealed to her

maternal instincts, and she brushed back his untidy hair affectionately and patted his cheek as she straightened his pillow.

Still carrying her too-tight boots, she walked over to the door of the smaller room where Spock and his father had been moved. It was usually an intensive care unit, but in this case, though they were both out of danger, it was a matter of the environmental controls. Sarek had seemed strong and alert after surgery, but in the late afternoon he had begun to have uncontrollable shivering fits. The normal ship's temperature was much too cool for his comfort during recovery. She glanced through the observation window at the two sleeping men before touching the door release.

She had been expecting it, but even so the blast of heat took her breath away for an instant. The temperature was set at 52 degrees, pleasantly warm to a Vulcan, very nearly insupportable to a human. A film of sweat instantly coated her skin, and dried almost as quickly in air virtually devoid of humidity. She could feel her mucous membranes drying out as she inhaled. Crossing the room to Sarek's bedside, she sighed in wonder. If this was the atmosphere comfortable for Vulcans, how did they endure the relative chilly dampness of a Terran-equivalent environment? She wished that she knew more about Vulcan -- and other alien physiology. Starfleet medical training was still woefully inadequate in the area; though the curriculum was continually being revamped, it hadn't nearly caught up to the number of other Federation species now serving in Starfleet -- especially for someone like her, who had completed her training when even less information was available.

Leonard did his best to keep up with the latest medical journals; if he hadn't, he wouldn't even have been able to attempt the heart operation on Sarek. He passed them on to her when he was finished with them -- thank god he didn't take the "now don't you worry your pretty little head" attitude that some doctors had toward curious nurses -- but it wasn't enough, not for him or for her. Christine knew that ninety-eight percent of his grumbling about Spock's internal arrangement came from a very vivid fear that something would happen to the Vulcan that he would be unable to treat. And there were others. The Enterprise had over two dozen non-Human crew members now, and there was no way that any of the medical staff could be fully current in information about all of them.

She thought, not for the first time, of leaving the Enterprise, at least temporarily, using her doctorate in biochemistry and her nursing degree and earning the extra credits for her M.D. But not yet. Nursing had been the quickest route to a deep space assignment, and she was still drawn by the lure of that. It hadn't only been to look for Roger.... But maybe in a few years. Medicine, on whatever level, was what she wanted to do; she was certain of that now. It was a question of what would be best, for her and for patients like the two before her.

Christine shook her head and looked down at Sarek. It was another symptom of her fatigue that she was standing here in her stocking feet in this unbearable heat, daydreaming, when she had only meant to do a quick visual check of the two Vulcans. Get out of here and go to sleep, Chris, she scolded herself.

She checked the dermal patch on Sarek's arm to make sure it was absorbing properly. It worked on the same principal as the spray hypo, allowing nutrients, liquids and medicine to transfer straight through the skin. It would be a day or two before Sarek would be ready for solid food. He looked far less formidable asleep than he did when awake. That seemed to be a characteristics shared by Humans and Vulcans. The granite sternness of his face was still apparent, but lines of pain and fatigue were there now which he did not allow to show when he was conscious. So restrained, so controlled, so proud... Spock's father. It explained a lot. She knew that from now on whenever she looked at Spock she would be aware of that formidable shadow behind him, just as he must always be aware of it, aware of his own need both to escape and to live up to his father's influence.

She slowly walked to the other bed, and looked at the man she loved. She felt the familiar mixture of pleasure and pain inside her; her instant reaction whenever she saw him. She usually pushed the feelings aside, knowing that it would be

impossible for him to deal with her professionally if she did not. But now, just for a moment, she let them surface. She was so damn glad that he was alive. He would be weak from the blood loss for a short time, but he would recover, and it was a small price to pay for the reconciliation with his father. She didn't know what, if anything, they had said to each other during the short periods when they had been alone, but the ease between them when they had teased Amanda had been good to see.

Christine studied Spock's face. He too looked vulnerable when he was asleep, and younger. She wondered what he had looked like as a baby. Amanda must know. Amanda, she thought a little bitterly, was lucky. There had been a moment when Spock's parents had put their fingers together -- the first contact she had seen between them -- and the love that had flowed through that touch had been palpable even to the non-telepaths in the room. She didn't know what Sarek, so very Vulcan, would call it, but what he felt for his wife obviously disproved the idea that Vulcans could not love.

She shut her eyes for a few seconds. Spock. She loved him so much. Did that make her a hopeless romantic? No, worse, she decided wearily. A fool. If Vulcans could love -- and she had never really doubted that they could, even before the evidence of today -- then Spock could love. He certainly loved Jim, and in his own way, his father and mother. But, it seemed, not her. Some other woman, another Vulcan maybe, gentler than T'Pol, someday, somewhere. But not Christine Chapel.

"Am I that unlovable?" she whispered to the gently beeping monitors. After a moment she clenched her jaw. "No!" she muttered in angry reply to herself. She could see her face dimly reflected in the monitor panel, and she stared back at it defiantly. She was not unlovable. Spock might not love her, but that was a different matter. To let her self-worth depend on her ability to attract him was madness. She would not hate herself for loving him, and neither would she hate herself for failing to make him love her. One could not will love, either to come or to go away.

More at peace, she allowed herself the luxury of looking at him with open tenderness. If the events of the past few days had left him more comfortable with himself, she was very glad of it. She straightened his covers. His hair, like the captain's was mussed, but on him it looked more incongruous. She smoothed it into place, and let her hand linger for a moment on his cheek. "Sleep well, Spock," she murmured lovingly, and raised her eyes to the readings one last time.

Amanda was watching her from the open doorway. Christine jumped, her entire body flinching in shock, and jerked her hand away from Spock's face.

"I'm sorry," said Amanda quietly. "I didn't mean to startle you."

"That's all right." Christine knew that her cheeks were scarlet.

"I didn't think anyone was in here. Nurse Wong said that you'd left."

"I was just going. A last minute check." She knew that her voice was brusque. She headed for the door.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Amanda's voice, faintly amused, stopped her. Amanda bent over and retrieved her boots from where she had dropped them by Sarek's bed.

"Oh... Thank you."

Amanda handed her the boots. "I couldn't sleep."

"Neither could I." There was an awkward silence. Christine felt uncomfortable on half a dozen levels.

"I thought maybe if I could see that they were all right..." Amanda's voice trailed off.

"I know. Understandable. Good night." Christine pulled her shattered composure back together and retreated.

"Good night."

Something in Amanda's tone stopped Christine just before the doors shut. A kind of weariness, maybe even a hint of loneliness? She turned back. Her own short replies had been on the edge of rudeness, and Amanda didn't deserve that merely because she'd walked in on Christine making a fool of herself.

The older woman, standing between the two beds, looked smaller and more fragile than she had earlier. She'd been under a terrible stress, and the release from that strain had left her... Like me, thought Christine. Exhausted, and too keyed up to rest. Unexpectedly, she remembered a remedy, a childhood comfort. Amanda was Terran too, maybe she... "Would you like some hot chocolate?" she said impulsively.

"What?" Amanda looked startled.

"We have a kitchen..."

Amanda's eyes widened. "Real chocolate?"

Christine nodded, beginning to smile. "Absolutely genuine. Not the brown water that comes out of the processors. That tastes the same as the coffee, which tastes like phaser coolant."

"I would love some. But if it's a nuisance..."

"No. I'd like some too. Stay here as long as you want. When you're done -- by the way, they probably won't wake -- come to the kitchen. It's off the storeroom on the far side of the reception area."

The day shift had left dirty cups and plates scattered around, and Christine shoved them impatiently into the recycling chute. Someone's coffee had spilled and soaked into the remains of someone else's half-eaten tuna sandwich. The absolute cleanliness demanded in the rest of Sickbay frequently broke down in here. She wiped the counters and table and hastily ran the sterilizer over them, wondering why the most professional doctors and nurses were often such personal slob.

The routine of getting out the milk and sugar and chocolate calmed her down. She had always liked to cook. She was glad she had issued the invitation, even though the idea of a cozy chat with Spock's mother was making her a little nervous. Amanda had seemed grateful, even though she had just caught Christine looking at her son like... Face it, thought Christine disgustedly, like an infatuated thirteen year old. "And you should know better," she lectured herself, "than to touch a Vulcan in any way that isn't necessary. She caught you smack in the middle of an unprofessional bit of impropriety. It's no wonder you're squirming inside."

She sighed, remembering that she had made almost exactly the same gestures when checking on Jim Kirk. But those had been medical, maybe a little maternal. With Spock they had been neither. And that was why she had jumped, why she had turned that telltale color, close to the shade of a Vulcan sky. She was embarrassed at what she'd done, embarrassed that Amanda had seen it, and embarrassed that she'd been unable to control her too easily read reactions. Damn.

She gave a slight shiver as she stirred the hot chocolate. It felt cold in here now, after the heat in the other room. She wondered if it felt cold to Amanda. Had she managed to adjust over the years to the temperature of her adopted planet? In any case, the hot drink would probably be soothing. It was nearly ready. She hesitated, and then reached in the back of the cabinet for two real china mugs. Why not? They made anything taste better than the disposables. She was pouring the chocolate when Amanda walked in.

"You're just in time. Are they still asleep?"

"Oh yes. That smells good."

"Thank you. I hope you like it. You looked like you needed it." She handed a mug to Amanda. "Either this or a stiff shot of whiskey. And Leonard -- Dr. McCoy -- keeps the keys to the liquor cabinet. Careful, it's hot."

Amanda took a sip and smiled. "I've gotten used to the normal temperature and spiciness of Vulcan food. My mouth is lined with asbestos now. This seems cool."

"Too cool? I can heat it up again." Christine tried her own. It was about two degrees off boiling. Her eyes watered.

"No. This is very good. I miss Terran food sometimes. When I do get some, it's likely to be hotel or banquet food. Not very satisfying."

"That's too bad." Christine felt awkward again. She realized that they were both still on their feet. "Please sit down, Dr. Grayson. Or is Lady Amanda more proper, since this is a diplomatic mission?"

"That's perfectly right. Dr. Grayson professionally, Lady Amanda as an

ambassador's wife. But under these circumstances, please, just Amanda." She was studying Christine. "You're one of the few people who seems to know the correct forms."

"I read an article once about Vulcan names and titles," said Christine, returning Amanda's gaze and forbidding herself to blush. "I hope you didn't mind the captain calling you Mrs. Sarek. Since you're Human, he probably used a Terran form automatically."

"No, of course I didn't mind, though it did sound strange at first. The poor man obviously had much more important things to worry about. How is he?"

"He'll be up and about in a few days — sooner if he has his way. He hates not being able to deal with things personally. We won't reach Babel for another six days, and he has all those appallingly undiplomatic diplomats to take care of..." She broke off, remembering who she was talking to. "I'm sorry. Speaking of undiplomatic remarks, that was a beauty."

Amanda was laughing. "Don't apologize. This trip hasn't exactly shown the Federation diplomatic corps on its best behavior. They'll all be much more professional once they actually get to work. As for my husband, his ability to be devastatingly insulting while remaining absolutely calm is one of the first things I noticed about him." She paused. "Spock has inherited the talent to some extent, as you may have noticed."

Christine looked into her hot chocolate. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed her boots lying on their sides on the floor. She bent to pick them up, and started to pull them on, grateful for the distraction. Amanda was pleasant to talk to about food or Vulcan titles or the diplomatic corps, but Christine preferred not to talk or think about Spock under the gaze of those gentle but shrewd eyes.

"Ouch!" she said. She had gotten a blister on one instep, but she would look more dignified with her boots on. She had a hole in the toe of one of her tights.

"Don't bother," said Amanda. "Your feet don't need any more punishment; you must have been on them all day."

Christine abandoned the boots. Aching feet, there was a safe topic. "More or less. Then when I sat down, they swelled up. I can requisition a new pair in a larger size for tomorrow — no, that's today now — but these boots are badly designed. It's inefficient. Does Starfleet really want us distracted by blisters and corns on days like the one we just had?"

"I hope you don't have too many like that!"

"No." Christine smiled. "Mostly it's routine — treating blisters and corns. But days like yesterday are what we're trained for."

"I'm glad. Thank you."

"It's our job." Did that sound ungracious? "You're welcome. Do you want some more hot chocolate?"

"Please." As Christine took her mug, Amanda said, "You were so calm through the whole thing. Even when the ship was being hit, even when the power went out. Even when you thought they were both dying."

"So were you." Christine poured with a steady hand and gave the hot mug back to her.

"I've lived on Vulcan for more than half my life now. Regardless of how it must sometimes seem to Sarek and Spock, that has taught me a good deal." She tilted her head thoughtfully. "I suppose medical discipline must teach you some of the same things."

Christine had never thought of it that way before. "I guess it does," she said slowly. "If we're any good at our jobs — and I like to think that this is the best medical crew in Starfleet — then we have to be compassionate. I don't know how it is on Vulcan, but a Human doctor or nurse without compassion is frightening. But at the same time, we have to be in control of our feelings. If they get the better of our brains, we're useless to our patients. In the operating room, pity and love are destructive, even a sign of incompetence." She sighed. "The big difference is that we only apply it to our professional lives, not our personal ones."

"I see,." Amanda was studying her again, and Christine decided to get up and refill her mug. The conversation was getting into uncomfortable territory once more. She had the uneasy feeling that fatigue and chocolate had just led her into saying more than she had meant to.

She sat down and stared into the brown liquid. There were swirls of foam on top, and she tilted the mug, making them rotate. Both she and Amanda should really be in bed. The silence stretched on, and Christine's mind went back to Spock, sleeping, healing three rooms away. If she listened in the silence, she could still hear the faint beeping monitoring his heartbeat...

"You're in love with him, aren't you?" asked Amanda.

"I'm..." The question, quietly and undramatically spoken, slipped past Christine's defenses. She stared back at Amanda. It meshed so perfectly with what she had been thinking... "Oh. I..." She stopped. Her face was flushing. "Oh, damn," she said softly. "I'm sorry."

"Why? Don't be."

Christine looked at a scratch in the surface of the table. It ran from the edge, under her mug, and off toward the center. She followed it with her eyes. What an idiot she was. Couldn't she have done something better than stammer and blush? Now that her brain was working again she could think of any number of things she could have said. "I beg your pardon?" would have bought time. "Commander Spock is a very fine officer" would have been dignified, and an incredulous "Who?" might have ended the conversation right there. What she couldn't imagine was what to do or say now that she had made a fool of herself in front of Spock's mother twice in one hour. She looked up. "I'm sorry," she repeated.

To her amazement, Amanda looked as distressed as she did. "Christine, I'm the one who should apologize. I had no right to ask you that. It was an invasion of your privacy by any standard, Vulcan or Human."

Christine shook her head and studied her drink again. "Don't worry about it. I can't claim much right to privacy on that subject. It's my own fault. I keep giving myself away."

"You do, a bit," agreed Amanda. When Christine looked up, there was a faint twinkle in her eyes. "Mostly fatigue, I would guess."

"Probably." There was another silence.

"I was glad you couldn't sleep either," said Amanda suddenly. Christine looked surprised. "Glad to find out that someone else was feeling some of the same things that I was," she amplified. "Glad for some sympathetic company."

Christine remembered the loneliness she had sensed earlier. "If this helped, that's good. At least you haven't — yet — given me the lecture I deserve on the stupidity of falling in love with a Vulcan."

"I'm hardly in a position to do that."

"Oh, damn. You must be overwhelmed by my tactfulness."

"Don't be so hard on yourself, Christine. I don't know why you're determined to call yourself names. To start with, I don't think that you're stupid. A logical result of that would be to imply that my son is unlovable. I think that we can both agree that isn't the case."

"Indeed," Christine said gravely. She paused. "One should always examine the logical results of any assumption."

Amanda peered at her, and started to giggle. "Good for you. The best piece of advice I can give you — if you're willing to take advice — is to keep your sense of humor. No matter what happens, you'll need it."

"That sounds ominous." To relieve her tension, she got up and started to clear away the mess on the counter.

"It wasn't meant to." Amanda got up and helped her. "Why a kitchen? Not just for late-night tete a tete's?"

"Occasionally a patient needs a diet that can't be supplied by the processors. And sometimes a decently cooked meal can be therapy. The menu keeps changing, of course, but the processors can only be programmed for a finite number of things at

one time. People miss their native foods."

Amanda was putting the sugar back in a cabinet. She pulled out a packet. "Dehydrated plomeek?"

"Yes."

"For soup. Half used, and then resealed." She looked at Christine thoughtfully. "It's tedious to make. I hope he appreciated it."

Christine was astonished to discover that her sense of humor was functioning again. "As a matter of fact, he threw it at me. Right across the corridor. The first batch, anyway. It made a beautiful mess!" Time had eased the hurt of that; she was starting to see the funny side of the incident.

"He did what? Why?"

"He..." Christine paused. "Was... under stress at the time." There must be proper Vulcan euphemisms for the condition, but she didn't know them.

"I see." Amanda was quiet for a moment. Then she said, "If you know that, then you must now that he will have to marry, eventually."

"Yes, but..." She put the pot in the recycler, and slid the china mugs into the sonic sterilizer. She had already revealed more than she had meant to; she might as well speak plainly. "Look, Amanda... I love him. I may be embarrassed about that sometimes, but I'm not ashamed of it. He's worth loving. But he simply doesn't love me, and I don't really think there's any chance that he ever will." She wiped the counter vigorously, and threw the towel with more force than necessary into the disposal chute. "And that's all there is to it."

"Does he know that you love him?"

"Yes." Her face was warm. That was a humiliating memory. "I told him once..."

"Told him?"

"An accident," she explained, not looking at Amanda. "It happened when most of the crew was infected by an inhibition-reducing virus. I wasn't the only one behaving oddly." She glanced up in time to see Amanda suppress a smile. "Some of the reactions were funny. Some weren't at all. As it turned out, the virus has valuable applications in psychotherapy, so the experience wasn't useless. But in my own case, I blurted out to Spock how I felt about him." She looked down at her hands.

"And?"

"The infection was transmitted by physical contact. I was holding his hands. He was so gentle. He said he was sorry..." She sighed. "I'm surprised that he can stand to be in the same room with me."

"Well, obviously he can stand it. And so can you. Neither of you are that fragile." Amanda's voice was suddenly crisp. "You're allowing your emotions to interfere with your thinking."

"Well, what do you expect me to do?"

"I expect you to consider both your own emotional needs and Spock's in a logical way."

"I thought you were sick of logic."

"Only when it's used as a defense mechanism. Not as a tool. Sit down."

Amanda now sounded every bit as commanding as her husband. Well, thought Christine, a little taken aback, she would have to be, or she'd have been crushed out of existence by the weight of his personality years ago. "I'm sitting."

"Good. We're now going to look at this emotional situation in a rational way. That's the advantage of a Human background and Vulcan training." Her face softened a little. "Christine, I could never have this conversation with a Vulcan woman. There are things I can say to you, as a Human, even though we don't know each other well, that a Vulcan wouldn't want to understand."

Christine studied the crack in the table again. "Don't... I'd rather you didn't say anything that Spock wouldn't want me to hear."

"Spock," said Amanda calmly, "is not always good at knowing what he wants. However, he seems to have made one decision which both his father and I deem correct. He has not, as he could have, asked the family to find him another

bondmate."

"Oh."

"He has chosen to live his life away from Vulcan. Sarek has finally accepted that, as he should have years ago." There was both satisfaction and sadness in her voice. "We deliberately raised Spock to be Vulcan — easy for Sarek, very hard for me..." She stopped, looking at a memory. "But he always asked more of himself than he needed to."

Christine opened her mouth and then shut it again. It seemed to her that he had probably been trying, and failing, to get Sarek's approval, but she wouldn't say that to Sarek's wife.

"But if Vulcan society won't really accept him, and he's cut off from his Human heritage, then where does he belong?" Amanda asked.

It was a rhetorical question, but Christine had an answer. "Here," she said with certainty. "That I'm sure of. He belongs on the Enterprise. He's accepted here, needed, respected... and loved." Amanda raised her eyebrows. Christine grinned. "Philia and Caritas, I meant. Leave Eros out of it for a minute."

"But it is a factor, even in Vulcans. And Spock, now that he is free, seems to have realized that there may be other... logical... ways of choosing a wife than those prescribed by tradition," observed Amanda.

Amanda was smiling now, and Christine smiled back, remembering the genuine curiosity in the question that Spock had asked his father. She wished that she could ask Amanda why Sarek had married her, but she supposed that Sarek's answer was as good as any. "'The logical thing to do,'" she quoted softly.

"Yes, indeed. What that may mean for Spock... He needs to be loved, you know."

"I've always thought so. But there have been times when I've wondered if that was only a projection of my own fantasies."

"No. I wish that he could admit that it's illogical to deny his needs. Or to deny his abilities. He's capable of love — and capable of happiness — his father certainly is." Her voice was musing now, and Christine stayed quiet, not wanting to break the mood. "For him to deliberately deny himself those things is a waste. To admit his Humanity isn't to betray his Vulcanness. He's both. Why can't he accept that?"

To that Christine had no answer. She couldn't claim to know Spock as well as his mother did, but she had seen far more of him in recent years, and she had asked herself the same question. "He's so lonely," she said sadly. After a few minutes she sighed. "But we've come around in a circle, you know. He's lonely, he needs to be loved, and he's capable of loving. He's going to need to marry, and he's apparently decided that he's better off choosing for himself — provided he's not simply ignoring the issue. But that doesn't mean that he's capable of loving me. An impasse."

"But logically stated, Christine." Amanda frowned slightly. "I can't tell you that he's going to love you. That's something that can only be worked out by the two of you. Maybe you're not really suited to each other after all, and you'll see that eventually. Maybe I'm even wrong to think that he'd be better off with a Human wife. That may be a prime example of cultural bias. But I think you would be good for him."

"I think so too. I have that much self-esteem!"

"Then love him, but don't push him. Wait for him to grow up."

Christine smiled, and then sighed. "How long? But that's my problem, not yours." Unexpectedly, she yawned.

Amanda copied her. "It's contagious," she said, her hand over her mouth.

"Think you can sleep now?"

"Yes. The hot chocolate was good, but I needed someone to talk to even more. And, propriety aside, I don't think either of us said anything that didn't need to be said. Can you sleep?"

"I think so. Thanks for..." Her voice trailed off. For what? For listening? For not making her feel like a fool? For taking her love for Spock

seriously? Something like that. She left the sentence unfinished, but Amanda seemed to understand.

As they left the kitchen, Christine noticed the time. 0324. She was back on duty in less than five hours. But it had been worth it. Spock and Sarek were still sleeping quietly, worn out by the operation, soothed by the heat and dryness. The two women watched for a few seconds and smiled at each other.

Just as they were leaving there was a slight change in one of the heartbeat rhythms. Christine turned sharply, seeing the change of the indicators even before Spock's eyes opened. He raised himself on his elbows to look at them curiously.

"Did we wake you up?" asked Amanda.

"I am not sure. I think not. However, it is not logical that you should be awake at this hour, Mother." He raised an eyebrow in mild reproof. "And if I am not mistaken, Nurse, this is not your duty shift. Your presence here will impair your efficiency later on. Also, your footwear is clearly non-regulation."

Amanda glanced at Christine, who pulled on her boots and reassembled her professional persona, wondering why she had fallen in love with a Vulcan. "Nor is it logical for you to be awake, Mr. Spock. It will also impair your efficiency as a recovering patient." She replaced the mild sedative patch on his arm with a fresh one, ignoring his automatic protest. "You can rest now, and be back on duty in two days, or you can argue, and stay here for five."

"That is not necessarily..." The sedative worked fast, the brown eyes were getting drowsy. "...correlated..."

"My logic is better than your logic, so there," murmured Christine under her breath, not really caring if Spock heard.

Amanda failed to control a splutter, and a flicker of sleepily surprise crossed Spock's face. "Have you ever tried to make *llamras*?" Amanda asked. Christine shook her head. "I'll show you. They go very well with *plomeek* soup."

Spock's eyes blinked open in astonishment. Amanda and Christine looked back at him with demure innocence. He tried and failed to say something, but retained an expression of wary befuddlement as the indicators dipped down into the sleep patterns. Amanda managed not to laugh until the door had closed behind them.

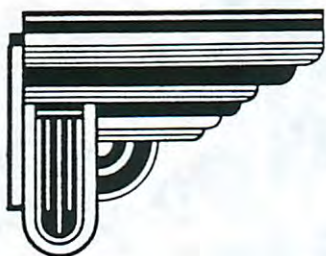
"Did you mean it?" asked Christine.

"Why not? Dinner tomorrow night, if Sarek can eat solids."

"All right. But Spock--"

"Will not be hurt by being disconcerted a bit. Now let's both go get some rest."

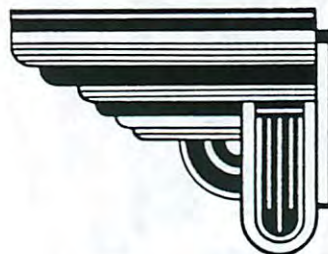
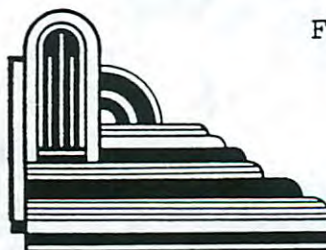
They exchanged sudden smiles of mutual affection, and walked out of Sickbay in a companionable silence.



BEFORE

I've been here before
Some other time
In this same place
Looking, searching
Never finding
Emptiness, alone
Forever moving through life
Never ever finding
What do I never find
Searching forever
Breaks my heart

— Patt







DANDELIONS IN THE WIND

There is a darkness in my heart
that haunts each waking hour,
whispering evil nothings
that only my soul can hear.
I cast a glance behind and see
how varied was the path;
too many years in travel spent,
now none are left to hold.
My vision narrows, yet intact,
my gaze on the horizon
sweeps ahead, hopes lost amid
cliches and platitudes.
The past is but an empty shell;
today is filled with mist.
I dread tomorrow's dawning light,
and going through the motions,
eternally trapped in endless spirals
of my own creation,
too tightly woven to escape,
unconvinced by time.
All those I've loved have vanished now,
as in a moment's breath;
all my decorations are
mere scraps of pretty tin;
too often have I hearkened to
insistent calls of duty.
Elusive motes of my life have been
merely memories flown,
so many bits of dandelion
scattered by stellar winds.

— Ellen Hulley



A PRIVATE LITTLE AMBITION

At times I find it hard to stifle laughter at
these foolish men who think they're using me,
a vehicle for power, a secret weapon,
when they don't know how I was using them.
Tyree thinks he has a prize in me,
when all along it is Kanutu who
spring the trap he so naively trips.
There never was a choice for mountain-born,
where life at best is harsh enough for men;
if fair of face, we let a girlchild live,
to offer to the people of the hills.
For a "captive" has a life of pampered ease,
spoiled and humored because of roots and herbs
which any fool could use, with half a brain.
But now I've learned of a power I can tap,
control beyond my wildest, deepest cravings,
for when the golden one and I shared blood,
mingling timeless through the mako root,
I shared his strength as well, and now I know
that he commands a mighty bird of night,
that travels stars, swiftly as wind through sky.
He holds such magic spells far stronger
than any I could ever pretend to compel.
The taste of this power sings still in my blood,
and it intoxicates beyond ambitions
That once I had amid these clowns.
I will no longer abide these silly men,
who are content in idle, mundane lives.
I need no one to help me scale these heights --
nor need I ever again be held by hands.
For I who have dreamt of stars cannot return
to the meagre dust of earth and man.

— Ellen Hulley



Who Is James T. Kirk?

by Karen C. Hunter

Most people enjoy a challenge, and the writers for Star Trek were no exception. Confronted by an alien character with logical thought processes and no emotions, almost everyone opted for the challenge of getting Spock into situations where he had to express some sort of feeling in order to resolve the situation. While they were doing that, most of them ignored the trickier challenge of showing James T. Kirk as a real, living being instead of "hero," "captain," and "brilliant tactician." A lot of writers failed to indicate any of his special qualities, putting him into stiff situations with deadly lines (The Way to Eden, for example). Two well-known professional writers have since gone on record as wishing Kirk would drop dead or transport away, leaving Spock in command as the logical -- and therefore better -- captain. Fortunately, neither Harlan Ellison nor Ben Bova are connected with Trek at the moment.

Most fans and other followers of Trek recognize the necessity of Jim Kirk but when pressed, often find it difficult to explain precisely why. They cite feeling and believability or say that no one would follow a captain whose decisions were based solely on logic. Many viewers see only the heroic stereotype or the pose as captain, without realizing that these alone make Kirk a stick figure of heroic virtue. Others admit his necessity but see a repellent person with no character beneath these layers, a man who must live up to the pose in order to have any personality at all. A long time ago, E. A. Oddstead called Kirk the man in the hero suit who couldn't get out. Oddstead indicated that Kirk's morals are a set of actions and words imposed on him by Starfleet, and that his "only redeeming virtue...is a deep-hidden humanity that...unexpectedly surfaces...like finding a diamond at the beach." (Spockanalia 2)

Yet to me this is a very false reading of the evidence we see concerning who Kirk is and what he believes in. Jim Kirk is a deep and complex character with many layers to his personality that he does not unfold for the casual viewer to examine. You have to search a little to find out what is on the deeper planes. The first impression of Kirk is of an extroverted, non-thinking macho man who generally uses others for his own ends or personal satisfaction; a man who accepts and believes only in his military orders; a man who thinks his way is best simply because it is what he has been taught. Yet this is most obvious only in the early days of his command, and even here it is possible to catch glimpses of the depth behind this impression. As time progresses and the mission continues, gradually the glimpses become deeper and clearer.

For one thing, Kirk is not really an extrovert, based on the classical Jungian definition as a person who is most at home in the actions on ideas. An extrovert

is likely to let the opinions of others affect his own actions; an introvert will form his own basis for action from his own opinions and then, generally, will not be moved, having made up his mind. It is extremely apparent that Jim Kirk almost always bases his actions on his beliefs or some personal decision: his defiance of authority in returning Spock to Vulcan was one such episode (Amok Time). His demand for a court-martial from Commodore Stone was another (Court-Martial). In fact, his well-known tendency to use people is simply a facet of this. It is not selfishness but is his desire to support his deep-seated value that his ship, his crew, and Starfleet are important — in that order.

There are, of course, many extrovert tendencies in Kirk, such as a wide circle of friends — both male and female; an ease and competence with high ranking officials; a self-assurance in dealing with his crew. These do not conflict with the definition of an introvert and can be understood as part of his public persona, developed specifically to promote the leadership qualities that his ship needs in order to survive. In two separate episodes it was stated outright that the commander of a starship must behave in specified ways, and the basis for action therein depended on Kirk's appearance as highly competent and invulnerable (The Enemy Within and The Children Shall Lead). Kirk works very hard to live up to the image he has concluded is necessary for doing his job successfully and only at times resents the necessity (Naked Time and Paradise Syndrome). At other times he is apt to let out his feelings in unsuitable ways, such as his anger toward Nils Baris (The Trouble with Tribbles), or to make an error because he is trying too hard to live up to the image which is not really natural to him (The Apple). Yet this persona is not something pasted on, and Kirk accepts it easily most of the time. It has become another facet of his being.

We first meet Jim Kirk as the new commander of a starship, the youngest captain in the fleet. At first he is aloof from others, unbending only a little with his old friend Gary Mitchell or his new friend, Spock, generally over a game of chess. Attempts at familiarity, such as with his old classmates in a bar (Court-Martial) seem forced and unnatural. With his own crew, familiarity does not exist. Spock is simply a competent officer, subordinate and different. Dr. McCoy is not yet on board; until Man Trap their friendship appears superficial. This is part of a conscious decision on Kirk's part. He feels alone at the top of the chain of command, responsible for the actions of others. Like anyone else in a new job, he feels he must prove to himself and others that he is capable of handling it — despite his own fears that he cannot do it. His ship comes first. He sacrifices his friend, Gary Mitchell, for the safety of his ship, because logic tells him it must be done. Later, he almost totally disregards his brother's death in the urgency of discovering the menace which is destroying Deneva and might also destroy the galaxy.

Yet this is the same man who is often accused of being too emotional for the job of starship captain. Certainly he is not afraid of emotion, for he expresses grief, regret, or passion as appropriate. Yet in reviewing every instance we know of Kirk's life, either directly or indirectly, there is no hard evidence that he has ever made a decision based entirely on emotional factors — or a decision that was disastrous for the ship in the long run. Before a decision is made, Kirk may laugh, tease, cry, ache for the unknown victims of a plague (The Cloud Minders), or suffer the pain of a friend, (Man Trap or Amok Time). But all his decisions are based on a very definite and positive value: that the Enterprise exists to benefit humanity and other intelligent life forms, and that it is his job as captain to see that their many needs are met. He is still saying this fifteen years later (The Wrath of Khan). "The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few, or the one." This can never be a totally emotional decision, for the many are often far away and impersonal, while the few or the one are often very close.

Charlie X was one of the first experiences Kirk had in dealing with a very obvious "one" and a nebulous "many." The boy was a clear threat to any Human colony, even to Kirk personally, yet Kirk continually tried to work with the boy and make him learn personal control. Even as the Thasians take Charlie away, Kirk

is asking that they leave him, knowing and accepting that it is impossible.

In A Taste of Armageddon, Kirk must choose to sacrifice the few who might die, in order to save two entire planets from eventual destruction. Kirk also defeats Vaal and Landru to save countless generations from inhuman rule, although the people in the situation were happy as they were. On Stratos he risks brain damage for himself -- the one -- in order to save both the Troglyte miners and the people of Merak II. In each case the immediate and emotional reaction might be to think only of the people one can see and to ignore the larger implications. Certainly his decisions in these incidents have brought him a lot of criticism. Yet Jim Kirk could make no other choice. His actions were based not on emotional reaction to a situation but on a rational and thoughtful examination of the facts. You may argue with his beliefs, but not with the logical way he supports them.

Kirk's willingness to sacrifice himself or others has occasionally brought a charge of death-wish or stupidity against him. It is very evident that he has an almost total disregard of physical danger. If a crew member is killed or injured, Kirk is regretful; but he does not either change his actions or attempt to keep others out of danger. Yet, in twenty or more years in Starfleet, a man could kill himself if he were really trying. Kirk simply has a higher threshold of risk avoidance than most others, to the point that he actually seeks out dangerous situations. All children are born into the world with very little risk avoidance and will try anything once. It is the basis of Human intelligence that we are curious. Eventually most of us learn what the boundaries of the world are and how far we are personally willing to push them. Some people never accept any limits, not even possible death. These are the people who today climb mountains, drive race cars, defuse bombs, fight fires, etc. In the future, Starfleet will surely qualify as a high risk occupation. Within Starfleet, security guards are at the most risk, by their own choice and for the same reasons as Kirk. Kirk can never be blamed that a man dies in such a job.

Most people older than age three are generally content to be curious from armchairs or in gaining a theoretical knowledge of what the limits of certain jobs are. Kirk is a very curious individual, as Dr. Adams patronizingly points out during Kirk's visit to the Tantalus Colony. In this Kirk is very like Spock, who protests the deaths of the Horta and The Companion because he could learn so much from them. But Spock is not a high risk taker, and has not chosen command as his chief interest. Spock is a scientist first, then an explorer, finally an officer. Later he is a teacher. Kirk is first and foremost a captain, then an explorer and a fighter.

At the same time, Kirk is not simply out for thrills, another charge frequently laid at his door. He is a very practical person, the kind who always asks, "What good is it?" He does not take risks simply to get high on the experience -- the difference between the race car driver and the fire fighter, the mountain climber and the bomb defuser. He is in Starfleet and captain of the Enterprise because he believes that he is making a difference for humanity by doing a job he is capable of doing well and which most others are not. Time and again he puts his life on the line, knowing clearly what he is doing because he is not afraid to make the attempt to save others from disaster or death. In this he is, gain, much like Spock and McCoy. Spock's IDIC teachings have taught him the value of all other lives. McCoy is a doctor who is concerned more about people than research or technological advances in medicine. Kirk uses his own ability to accept risk and live under high stress in order to save lives.

Now this ability would be of little use if Kirk were stupid or made bad decisions. He'd have been dead long ago. But we see in nearly every situation that Kirk has quick and correct intuition about events and people that stand him in good stead. He probably would have to think for a long time to explain; why he makes some of his decisions, and to those watching him, the end often seems manipulated. In The Ultimate Computer, when Kirk tried to explain why he and Bob Wesley made the decisions they did so that the Enterprise was saved, it sounds forced. Spock could certainly argue logic with him and looks as if he would like

to try, but Kirk was correct. He won. At times, no matter how illogical or emotional the decision looks, the results speak for themselves. On Sigma Draconis VI, when Kirk had only hours to save Spock's life, he made an illogical decision based on supreme illogic, which turned out to be correct (Spock's Brain). It may be impossible for people who have less trustworthy intuition to accept that Kirk's is so reliable; but accepting Jim Kirk on his own terms, we have to admit that his intuition is usually right.

Because Kirk is so often correct, it follows that he dislikes failure a great deal. "I don't like to lose," he tells Saavik; and we often see him resisting when acceptance might make more sense (Errand of Mercy, Gamesters of Triskelion). It seems a stubborn non-acceptance of the inevitable, but Kirk usually brings things around to an acceptable conclusion. Failure to him is more than a personal disaster, and he rarely mentions his career at such times. His failure to affect Vaal will destroy the Enterprise and doom the native to eternal slavery; if Anon Seven's problems are not solved, the Enterprise will be destroyed and war continue for centuries; failure on Stratos means the Troglyte miners will remain downtrodden and all of the people on Merak II will die of plague. Kirk does not have the simple problems most people have: failure for most of us will not destroy our families and bring death to entire worlds. Even Kirk's reprogramming of the Kobayashi Maru simulation (The Wrath of Khan) is designed to make it possible for him to rescue the ship. Note that he does not say it makes it possible for him and his own to escape. Kirk's unwillingness to accept failure is because of the widespread results in most instances.

Because Kirk is such a complex character, with so many layers and conflicts, life is not simple for him. In every instance, in every action, he must balance the logical and emotional approaches to each question in order to find the best solution. Spock, with all his knowledge and logic would certainly make different choices. He would not have been able to save himself on Sigma Draconis VI, for example. His logic alone tends to be sterile, unable to make choices suitable for individual beings. His experiences on the Galileo show this clearly; Kirk would not have made any of the same decisions Spock did, except possibly the final one (Galileo Seven). Yet, emotion alone does not have the answers. Dr. McCoy, that supremely emotional and caring man, could never have chosen the possibility of condemning all of Eminiar to war and destruction. It took Kirk's analysis to see the possibilities inherent in the situation and to make the gamble necessary for the desired outcome. Kirk listens to Spock and to McCoy, but it is his intuition that puts their arguments into proper perspective. To understand him, we must accept the place of intuition as well as logic and emotion in building an image of reality. Jim Kirk comes up with answers that are greater than the sum of the parts.

In all the time we know Jim Kirk, he seems to make only one major error, and it is a personal one. He gives up the captaincy for the admiralty. (Star Trek: The Motion Picture). We do not see why he makes this choice, nor do we see him living with the results. We only are aware when he abruptly returns to command and finds himself emotionally incapable of dealing with it. He continues to make errors as he gets himself back on his feet, pushing Scotty too hard and too fast over the warp drive, handling his interviews with Decker with an unbelievably heavy hand, failing to listen to McCoy and his advice. In this situation the roles shift, and McCoy becomes the balancing point around which Kirk and Spock must settle themselves. For Spock has returned at the same time, with his logic pushed almost to the breaking point. There seems almost no common ground for the three men to talk, until Spock meets Vejer and recognizes for the first time in his life that emotions are necessary to every person's life. His acceptance of this brings Kirk to stop denying an emotion of his own, to accept that it is not wrong of him to want and need his own command back.

For three years Kirk has been denying the validity of his own being. Now he is once again himself, Spock can accept that emotion and intuition are necessary skills for command, and McCoy can breathe a sigh of relief. Kirk takes back the

whole command onto his own shoulders, deals with Vejer on its terms, and is ultimately able to find the clue needed to prevent defeat. He is even willing to sacrifice himself to accomplish this and is prevented both by strong holds from his two friends and by the obvious desire of Decker for that sacrifice. One feels quite sure that if Decker had been absent, Kirk would have taken his place in the rainbow whirlwind.

Yet, unlike Spock who slowly finds himself and changes radically over the fifteen years we have known him, Jim Kirk is much the same man who faces the wrath of Khan as the man who first took command. During the incidents on Psi 2000 (The Naked Time), early in the first years of the mission when everyone else is succumbing to their deepest fears or desires, Kirk is admitting to his total dependence on his ship. Spock, who is worrying about love, is able to pull out of his depression because Kirk needs him, but Kirk pulls himself back together because the ship needs him. His deepest desire is that he never lose his ship, and this enables him to fight and win.

Of course, it is not the actual physical presence of the Enterprise which motivates him. He uses the ship as needed in order to fight, despite the occasional cries of the Engineer, "My puir bairns," Spock's declarations that the hull is overheating, or similar calamities. He is able to take the damage in stride as long as he resolves the situation in the end. Enterprise is really a symbol of what Kirk needs and wants, which he calls My Command or My Ship, but which is really something else.

Command of a starship is the only place Kirk has ever found that will combine all his needs and abilities in the best combination so that he can be happy doing something well. When Kirk gives up his command again and faces Kahn as an admiral, he is not as bitterly unhappy as he was before the Vejer incident. Yet Spock and McCoy both know he is not happy with what he is doing. Again, we are unaware of what pressures were put on him to make this decision. His explanation indicates that he feels he is too old to be a starship captain. Once again, his intuition - or his acceptance of it - has failed him, for both his emotional friend and his logical friend urge him to take back the ship. His actions indicate that the old abilities are not gone. Jim Kirk defeats a master military mind, one bred for superior intellect, and we know that he is the only man who could have done it.

Throughout the fifteen years we have known Jim Kirk, he has changed his beliefs very little. He came to us fairly well integrated, a man who had made his choices early in life and who knew what he wanted to do. Despite setbacks and challenges, very little happened to make him grow. It may be an unconscious longing for growth and change that led him into the admiralty for the first time, and a conscious denial that all he could ever be was a starship captain that led him back the second time. It may be that, given enough time, Jim Kirk could eventually find a new niche in life where he will grown and find new challenges, but something else has happened which will probably make a whole new set of choices in his life.

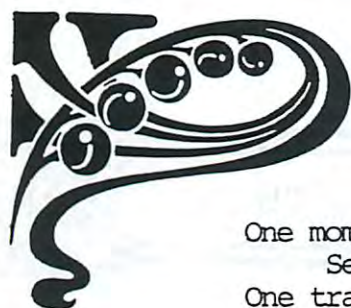
One of the biggest features of Kirk's life, one that could never have been anticipated by either man, is his friendship with Spock. Neither had any reason to expect that their relationship would be anything extraordinary. Of different races and backgrounds, one the captain and the other his subordinate, the two men would seem to have little common ground. Yet Kirk goes from an almost amused acceptance of a Vulcan's foibles to a deep and strong dependence on a friend. And it is this friendship which will finally bring about a startling re-evaluation for Jim Kirk. Part of his philosophy of life, based on his non-acceptance of failure and his indifference to danger, is a refusal to accept the necessity and finality of death. The most moving and dramatic experience we ever saw Kirk face was to watch his friend Spock die, knowing that Spock's death was inevitable. If Kirk cannot learn to accept that death, he has automatically condemned his ship and crew in Spock's place.

Now Spock is gone, and his great mind and relentless logic will no longer be with Kirk, helping him to make his choices. No matter what Kirk does in the future,

- captaincy, admiralty, or something entirely new - his life has changed. He must search and find a new balance within himself, both for living without his friend and for accepting for the first time that there are no-win situations. If he cannot come to this acceptance, he will probably wither and shrink into a bitter man, eventually unable to command his ship. Those of us who understand and respect him believe he has the capacity to grow into a bigger and wiser person.

It is possible that Kirk will someday find Spock again, but that will not prevent Kirk from changing. The process has begun with Spock's death. Also, Spock will have gone through his own experience of death and rebirth, if what we are told about the future proves true. Through death, failure, and rebirth, new facets of both personalities will come alive. They can no longer come together on the basis of the past. Spock may have found some of the answers he wished for when kohlinahr was denied to him. Kirk may learn to accept that his new responsibility is to guide a whole new generation through Starfleet, alone.

There are always possibilities, Spock said, and Kirk agreed with him. We have learned from both of them much about love, friendship, life, and responsibility. If the future holds that Spock will be restored, or if it does not, we may all learn a little something new about all these things, and about death as well. It promises to be fascinating - for Kirk, for Spock, and for us all.



Interlude



One moment removed from the current of my life --
 Separate, as if belonging to another;
One tranquil respite for my dreams to live
 In a pine green forest steeped in perfect peace;
One timeless world out of reach, for a season,
 Of the past and future in forgotten darkness.

One love -- exquisite, unexacting, tender --
 A flesh and blood woman to touch and to hold;
One innocent promise of a man's fulfillment
 Held hostage to shadows of overriding destiny;
One living warmth I lost the right to enjoy
 When I gave myself to a colder passion.

One sunlit springtime no fate intended --
 Lost beyond hope to the darkening sky.
One storm brings remembrance, and my dreams awaken
 To a sea of stars and the ship that sails among them.
I kiss her cold lips, and with sad muted longing,
 I sigh for what has passed and will never be again.

-- Elaine Sheppard



Conventionally Speaking

by Lynda Carraher

The following sextet has nothing whatsoever to do with sex. (Oh, SHUCKS!!!) They are short presentations I put together at various times, mostly during the summer of 1983, to use as opening statements on convention panels.

Are We Taking Trek Too Seriously?

That's a pretty silly question. After all, I'm only 1,500 miles from home and annihilating six months of savings to discuss a television series that's been out of production for fourteen and a half years. What on earth could make anyone think I'm taking it all too seriously.

Well, to be brutally honest about it, I have to admit that perhaps we are. When you think in terms of time, the money, the sheer energy that Trekkers devote to their chosen madness, it gets a little scary.

In the time I've devoted to Trek over the last five years, I could probably have learned to speak classical Greek, or grown and canned enough fruits and veggies to feed my family for a decade, or guided a classroom full of primary school children through the most vital portion of their education.

I haven't done any of those things.

But, in reality, if I hadn't gotten into Trek, would I have done any of those things? Probably not. I'd have just gotten five years older, fifty pounds heavier, and sprouted a few more gray hairs.

Come to think of it, I've done all those things anyway.

I can tell you a few things I wouldn't have done if I hadn't become a screaming Trekkie.

I wouldn't have become a professional journalist. I wouldn't have become an avid supporter of the space exploration program. I wouldn't have written two novels and a dozen short stories. And, probably most important, I wouldn't have developed half a dozen long-distance and occasionally face-to-face relationships with some very intelligent, sensitive, generous, lovely people.

Now, certainly there's a potential for a vast amount of abuse in any hobby. It you're losing the rent money at the race track, or putting your kids in foster

care so you can spend more time on your stamp collection, or postponing needed medical treatment so you can buy a new pair of water skis, you're in trouble. I think any of those things could probably be construed as the action of a person who's rapidly losing touch with reality.

I heard a lady at Space Trek II telling someone that her husband had "finally gotten tired of my Trekking and took the kids and moved out." Now, if that was an honest assessment, that lady has a major problem. My guess, however, would be that there were probably some very basic problems in that relationship to start with, and she's either using her Trek activities as a handy and brief explanation for her change in status, or her Trek activities stepped up in intensity as her personal life became less and less satisfying.

Everyone needs spaces in his or her life marked "This is for Me. This is Mine." And I don't care if it's indulging yourself in a bubble bath or breaking sales records for your territory or writing Trek stories. If it makes you feel good about yourself, if it enables you to function better in other areas of your life, go for it.

Just don't forget to brush your teeth, hug your kid, and take time to smell the flowers along the way.

Where's the Magic in Star Trek?

When I mentioned to a friend of mine that I was going to be on some panels here, she asked the subjects. And when I said one of them was "Where's the Magic in Trek", she promptly replied, "Everywhere!"

The more I thought about that response, the more appropriate it seemed. Everywhere.

It's in stories that can still raise questions, start arguments, and give birth to "prequels" or sequels, even after umpteen viewings. It's in the character relationships that allowed people from diverse backgrounds to come together for a common goal, to respect and enjoy and depend on those differences. It's in the visual effects, particularly in the play of light and shadow that emphasized and highlighted the light and shadow of complex personalities and conflicting demands. There's also a certain amount of "magic" in acquiring and enjoying the "inside information" we so assiduously scrounge out of anyone who had even the most remote affiliation with the show.

It's a participatory kind of magic that's rather rare in much television. There was something about the series that sucked us in, and when there were no more new episodes to be seen, we refused to let go of it and busily set about developing ideas of our own, exploring facets that had been touched on or hinted at, but which were never fully developed in the aired episodes.

The structure of the series gave us a tremendous boost in those efforts, because it established, almost consciously, that Star Trek could be virtually anything. It could be high adventure, bright comedy, serious drama, touching romance, incisive character study, or pure fantasy. Frequently, it managed to be several of those things at once.

There's a certain magic about the characters in their skills, in their abilities, in the way they function in the world of the future that was developed for the series. They are heroes in the classic sense -- they expand what it is possible for mankind to achieve. And yet at the same time, they manage to be recognizable people -- people with needs and desires and flaws that make them real, rather than godlike beings whose achievements we can never hope to duplicate.

There's magic in the optimistic view of the future. Gene Roddenberry said,

"Star Trek is saying 'It's not all over. There will be a future, and it will be as exciting, as challenging, as anything we can imagine'."

There's magic in the way Star Trek allowed us -- even forced us -- to examine ourselves; to come face to face with the complexities and dangers and dark sides of humankind; in the way it told us we can learn to live together as human beings, as intelligent beings even when we are not 'human,' and that we can learn -- we must learn -- to cherish our diversity rather than letting that diversity destroy us.

There's another kind of magic in Star Trek, and that's the magic of discovering you're not alone. You're not going to be relegated to the lunatic fringe for stating a belief that humanity's future must lie in breaking away from this lonely island Earth. You're not going to be laughed at for trying to emulate the heroic, or for believing that the glue that holds the universe together is simple human caring.

And if that's not magic, I don't know what is.

Humor in Written Trek

WHEN IT WORKS AND WHEN IT DOESN'T

Somehow, I suspect that analyzing humor is rather like analyzing sex -- looking too closely at how it works is apt to take some of the fun out of it . . . particularly if you attempt to analyze and participate at the same time.

But in both humor and sex, a little knowledge is not so dangerous a thing as the philosophers would have us believe. A little knowledge of how things work can both increase your enjoyment of the moment and help you create more such moments in the future -- and now I think I'm going to drop that analogy before I get us all in trouble.

In the broadest sense, humor is humor, whether it's a Star Trek story or a Woody Allen routine or a Mark Twain essay. Humor takes the familiar and throws a banana peel in its path; it pops the suspenders of our pretenses and leaves us with our dignity in a puddle around our ankles. Like a funhouse mirror, humor distorts reality. It gives us a recognizable world, but with a new perspective.

Humor is also intensively subjective. That which reduces me to a quivering mass of jello may leave you absolutely cold, and vice versa. So in discussing what works and what doesn't, I can only talk about what works for me, as both writer and reader.

One of the forms that works best for me is a combination of characterization humor, the curve ball, and the pyramid effect.

Characterization humor depends on a familiarity with the quirks of the individual. We know Kirk has a very low frustration threshold, Spock is logical, McCoy is suspicious of machinery. If those traits are magnified, or if the characters are placed in a situation where their instincts and reactions are inappropriate, we have the beginnings of a humorous situation.

The curve ball is the taking of reality and giving it a twist -- when familiar things pop up in unfamiliar places, when they work -- or are worked on -- in unexpected ways.

And the pyramid effect is a combination of the first two, with increased repetition of the curve as things get further and further out of control.

An example we're all familiar with is the scene in 'The Trouble With Tribbles' where Kirk opens the overheads hatch and is inundated with tribbles.

The characterization aspect comes in when it is Kirk who is on the receiving end. It wouldn't have been nearly as funny to see the guard get dumped on. We've seen Kirk become increasingly frustrated and impatient with the situation, and it is he -- not the guard -- who opens that hatch. He has all but pushed the guard

out of the way, remember, thus literally bringing the flood on himself.

The curve ball aspect is the appearance of the tribbles from the hatch. Tribbles don't belong in grain storage bins, and seeing them suddenly pour out was — on the first viewing — a definite surprise.

Yet by the law of the pyramid, it was inevitable that they be there. The tribbles had been everywhere they weren't supposed to be — on the bridge, in the food processors, on the transporter pads. If anything else had come out of that hatch — quadrotriticale, or Cyrano Jones, or ten thousand ping-pong balls, the pyramid would have collapsed, and we'd have felt somehow cheated.

And cheating the audience is the cardinal sin in humor. In any kind of writing, the author makes a deal with the reader — I'm going to tell you a story, so sit down and listen. But in humor, the author has to have the reader's active cooperation and participation. The reader has to go beyond the words on the paper — has to visualize what is happening when the food processor starts shooting lemon pies at Dr. McCoy; has to empathize with Mr. Spock when the Guardian of Forever deposits him in Disneyland; has to remember Captain Kirk's occasionally over-inflated opinion of himself when he falls flat on his captainly fanny.

If the author is going to ask the reader to do all this, then she has some obligations, too. She has to make it clear from the first page — from the first paragraph, if possible — that this is going to be a comedy, and she has to keep it that way, even if her subplot is something else.

She should remember who her characters are, and what they are, and build the humor around that — she shouldn't start with the situation and just shoe-horn in whichever character happens to be on her mind at the moment.

And she shouldn't cheat the reader by doing the reader's job — if the writer has done her job, the reader will know it's funny. The writer doesn't have to keep popping in to remind everyone how hysterical the situation is.

There's one other thing that I think is extremely important, and that's a visible fondness for the characters. Humor that casts any of them as bumbling boobs or sappy idiots doesn't do a thing for me.

Without that affection, without an ability to take a needle rather than a baseball bat to the idiosyncrasies of the individuals, we find ourselves asked to laugh not with them, but at them. Without affection, humor becomes put-down; it crosses that very thin line that separates teasing from viciousness, like the line that separates ethnic humor from racist insult.

In a way, it's the author inserting herself again, putting on a mantle of superiority that goes for the smirk instead of the guffaw, and I don't want that in Star Trek.

I want to be able to laugh with sympathy and love; I want to be able to see myself in Star Trek humor, sliding toward chaos in a world gone topsy-turvy, because my world goes topsy-turvy sometimes, too. And it's nice to know, when I spill the spaghetti on a dinner guest, or put my foot in my mouth when meeting someone I'd like to impress, or discover that the cat has pulled down the Christmas tree ... that at least I don't have tribbles in my quadrotriticale.



The authors of 'Star Trek Lives' discussed the three main characters as "yesterday, today, and tomorrow", assigning McCoy, Kirk, and Spock those characteristics, respectively, and I think there's a fair amount of validity in that.

McCoy, as 'yesterday', is capable of calling forth a certain amount of

nostalgia in us, even though it maybe a nostalgia for something we have never, in fact, known. Because of his Georgia background, I tend to associate McCoy with the positive aspects of the 'old plantation' myth ... the beautiful ladies and the gracious men, the scent of magnolias, the whole fantasy.

McCoy sometimes conveys the sense -- whether he vocalizes it or not -- that life is moving too fast; has become too mechanized, computerized, dehumanized ... a feeling I think many of us have to cope with from time to time, and we long for a gentle evening on a porch swing.

McCoy's protestations that he's "just an old country doctor" represent another nostalgia-for-that-which-wasn't. I tend to believe that the kindly old physician is a created myth. If Marcus Welby or young Doctor Kildare ever did in fact exist, they were pensioned off a long time before the advent of the ice-cold stethoscope and the Wednesday afternoon golf date.

McCoy seems to represent a kind of sanctuary -- a comfortable and comforting presence. Now, I must admit -- at risk of starting an argument here -- that I don't find McCoy particularly sexy. He's a lovely, gentle man who obviously has a great capacity for caring, but he doesn't make my pulse race. And that's all right. Sometimes the most rewarding relationships come not from the storm-tossed sea, but from the quiet pond.

And again -- if you've been listing -- you hear that theme. Quiet. Serene. Constant. Secure.

McCoy's place in the scheme of things has to do, I think, with balance and stability. One of the stablest geometric structures is the triangle, and the Kirk-Spock-McCoy relationship is quite purposely patterned on that structure. McCoy very often functions as the base line. He touches each of the other characters, but is frequently quite far from the apex where they meet one another. He ties them to his own reality and supports them at the same time.

Of course, you can turn a true triangle so that the base becomes one of the upright sides, and again that works very well with dramatic structure. The Spock-McCoy or Kirk-McCoy relationship can become the apex, with the third character representing the base line, but very often -- too often, I'm sure, for McCoy fans -- he remains the base.

Dramatically, that continues to work very well. You have two very strong, very vital characters already. Not only are they quite capable of running off with the story all by themselves, they are distressingly prone to do so, and they carry the reader or viewer into the thick of it with them.

That's where McCoy comes into his own.

Because McCoy is so often physically or dramatically removed from the heart of the action, he allows us to step back with him and examine what is really going on. There's a marvelous poster that goes something to the effect of "I realize this project is terribly important, and must be completed on schedule with the least amount of confusion and disorganization possible ... but it is very difficult to remember that your original objective was to drain the swamp when you're up to your ass in alligators."

So when Spock and Kirk are up to their asses in dastardly Klingons or seductive temptresses, McCoy is around to remind us -- and them -- that there are greater issues at stake here. Where is the line between naked aggression and defending one's own beliefs? When must logic and training be abandoned in favor of intuition and personal morality? At what point does mechanization cease to be the servant and threaten to become the master?

When McCoy's around, and when we have the sense to listen to him, he can pull us out of the clutches of those alligators and let us see the swamp again. And when you think about it, an alligator-repeller isn't a bad sort of guy to have around.

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A Spock Panel

I don't know that there's anything left to say about the Vulcan that hasn't already been said, but you are obviously expecting something, or you wouldn't be here. Maybe I can start with taking another look at the subject, 'What Makes Spock So Endlessly Intriguing?' Now there's an original idea!

Anyway, I'd like to read you something that I found in TV Guide a few years ago, in an article entitled 'The Charisma Factor,' The author was discussing three specific archetypes, which he labeled 'The Hero,' 'The Antihero,' and 'The Mystic.' I quote:

"The hero is the idealized person. He looks the way we wish we looked, says things the way we'd like to say them. He is bold and aggressive; an object of fantasy....The anti hero is more like 'the common man.' He fits in with the rest of us, looks and sounds like us, reflects our attitudes. We feel with him....The mystic is foreign to us; he may seem as unusual, different, strange, or unpredictable. We are uncertain about the mystic's message. We can't pin him down. He is not like us, yet his foreignness has a strange sort of appeal."

Sound familiar?

Well, folks, that article was not about 'Star Trek.' The author was referring specifically to the individuals who, at that time, were the anchormen on the three network news programs!

So it would seem there is a pattern at work here which Roddenberry may or may not have been aware of when he set up the characters. There would seem to be a very basic kind of attraction to the mystic, or the exotic. In the case of Spock, the attraction — for many of us — was not only overwhelming; it seems to have been self-perpetuating.

Fan authors for years have analyzed, dissected, fantasized over, and just generally been obsessed with this character. He's been seduced, married, widowed, killed off, resurrected, duplicated, tortured, tempted, trifled with, and talked about.

Why?

Is it because he suffers so beautifully? Is it because he appeals to something in us which is drawn to the exotic merely on account of its exotic-ness? Is it because, as the TV Guide article suggested, we can't pin him down? Or is it because we see something in Spock that we recognize in ourselves, and feel certain that he, in turn, would recognize in us?

We have all been aliens in a world we never created. There have been hurts we could not show the world, because that showing would ultimately destroy us. There have been times when our own emotions have appeared to be our greatest enemy, times when we have wished to build a protective wall around our vulnerabilities; and, conversely, times when we desperately longed for someone with the persistence to break down those walls ... to see us — and more importantly, to accept us — as we really are. Or, at any rate, as we'd like to think of ourselves.

So Spock becomes a mirror onto which we project ourselves, hoping for an idealized reflection of what we would like to become. Whatever else he is, whatever other functions he serves, it is perhaps the first best destiny of this alien life form to allow us to seek out and explore the essential humanity within each of us.

Poetry

Sometimes, the simplest things become the toughest. Spur-of-the-moment decisions ("So what if I forgot to take my pill? Nothing's going to happen this once!") sprout major consequences. Like agreeing to sit in on a poetry panel.

Because the bottom line is, I'm not sure I know what poetry is.

I can tell you what's not poetry.

Poetry is not what you find inside a Hallmark greeting card.

Poetry is not just a random collection of thoughts written in abbreviated lines with funny capitalization.

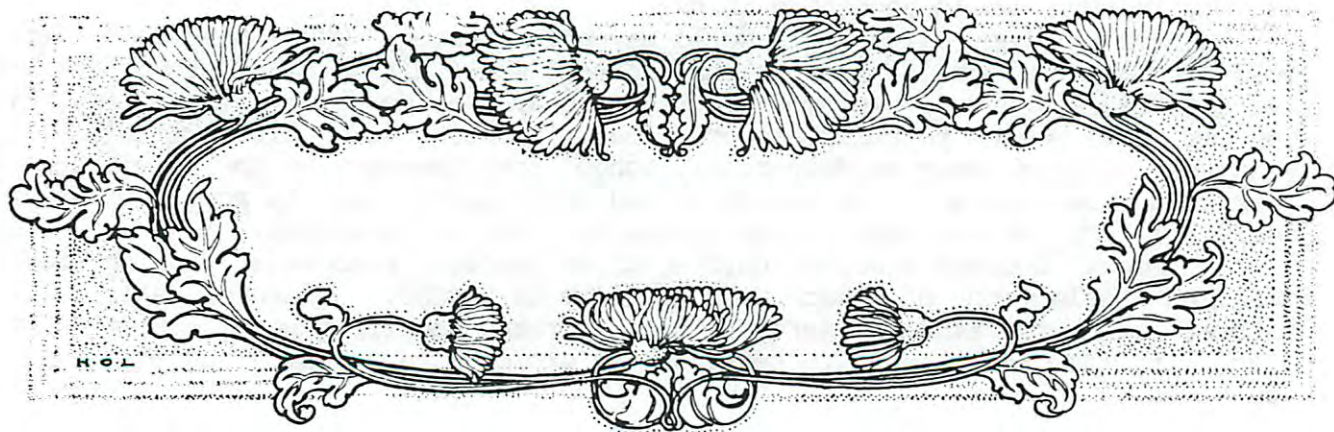
Poetry is not a series of words with every fifth or tenth one rhyming.

There's a lot of ... "stuff" ... out there in Treklit that "Looks like a duck, walks like a duck, and quacks like a duck." But it isn't a duck. And it isn't poetry, either.

For whatever reason — and I suspect it's quite simply that poetry is the toughest thing in the world to write well — a lot of fan writers who are quite adequate in other forms seem to drop the ball when they sit down to create a piece of poetry. Somewhere between the poet's mind and the reader's eye, a vital connection is missed. The spark is just not jumping the gap, and therefore ignition is not being achieved. And you have to have that ignition. Something has to light up in the reader's mind; a kind of recognition has to occur.

It's not the kind of recognition that occurs when one looks at a photograph, but rather the kind that occurs when one looks at an impressionistic painting — it's an all-of-a-piece mnemonic device — a mood evoker, if you will, that uses a number of techniques to get the message across.

And maybe that's as good a definition of poetry as anything — an evocation. It's an experience, or an observation, or a feeling, evoked by the poet's choice of language and rhythm and image which, at its best, is a springboard ... not to the external world, but to the internal one. A good poem launches an exploratory mission into that uncharted country of one's own mind, and fuels your own personal voyage of discovery.



Changes in Star Trek: A Retrospective

by Stephen Mendenhall

It seems like ancient times when Gene Roddenberry first began on Star Trek. Stephen E. Whitfield was writing the seminal The Making of Star Trek. Blacks were very rare on the screen, moonflights were still a fancy, and Don Johnson and Tom Selleck were unknowns. Sigh. Much has changed. Much hasn't.

But the series, movies, novels, and fan stories have given plenty of food for thought. There is talk of establishing a Star Trek Canon, like that of the early Church. There would be the original writings, the series; then there's the Apocrypha, analogous to the animated episodes. There is disagreement over whether something such as the Books of the Maccabees should be considered canonical; by the same token, some animated episodes, and early versions of ST scripts may seem canonical. The Pseudepigrapha are considered somewhat less reliable than the Apocrypha; the Gospel of Pilate is one such. Much of these are not well written, and even seem outlandish--like some novels and fan stories. The fan stories could also be compared to some of the Lives of the Saints, whose authenticity is sometimes in question. But these also vary in quality. And occasionally the stature of one of these may change; the novel, THE VULCAN ACADEMY MURDERS was originally a fanzine story [Ed. Note: A Sarek/Amanda story, never published, rather expanded greatly into its novel format]. Some novels are sequels to episodes, just as some Apocrypha is drawn directly from original canonical work.

One could also draw parallels between pilgrimages and conventions, and there's the usual overzealousness, such as fans across the country being urged to write to WPIX-TV in New York so they'll put Star Trek back on the air. This sort of thing seems futile, and if I ever own a station one of the things I'd like to do is broadcast Part Two of MANAGERIE without showing Part One for several weeks before or after. Who'd notice? Fans know the story anyway.

Starting out with The Big Picture, the United Federation of Planets was a vague, amorphous collection of alien and human colonies and home planets, fighting the nasty Klingons and mysterious Orions. Very, very little was known of the Romulans. The Star Trek Technical Manual tried to fill in a few blanks, but didn't do very well. The Federation Charter is just a rewording of the United Nations Charter with no attempt to improve any of the flaws, and including the implicit assumption that all member life forms would be either male or female. The Manual has a few interesting entries about Starfleet and starbases, but there are still questions unanswered. The Making of Star Trek states that there are seventeen starbases, presumably numbered 1-17. But what is the status of K-7? And in THE ALTERNATIVE FACTOR, Kirk orders Sulu to leave for Starbase 200(!) just before the storm hits. The Manual makes no effort to resolve these problems. It's possible to come up with answers of course, but many writers are lazy.

When does the Star Trek series take place? We have received but a few contradictory clues:

<Zephram Cockrane discovered the space warp and died over 150 years ago at the age of 87.

<Kirk estimated Khan had been asleep two centuries.

<A crewman tells the Talos IV survivors the time barrier's been broken--"our new ships can--" That was thirteen years ago; Columbia had been launched eighteen years before that. What can the new ships do that they couldn't do when Cochrane discovered the space warp? And how is it different from what the Enterprise does for the first time in NAKED TIME?

The best theory I've seen is one in one of the BEST OF TREK books, that the space warp referred to is a system of hyperspatial gateways left by an ancient alien race. The Enterprise travels at warp 5 between the gateways, and makes further, faster jumps through the gateways. The only problem is why these are never mentioned on the series. Well, we aren't shown everything. But that still leaves open the question of the vast improvement the crewman was telling the survivors about.

<The bottle of ale McCoy gives Kirk has the year 2287--if that's in Terran years, it was obviously re-bottled. It seems like an unlikely coincidence that it might be Romulan years. It could also be "Romulan Dynasty 22, Year 87."

<ST II starts by flashing the words IN THE TWENTY-THIRD CENTURY on the screen. Or is it the LATE twenty-third?

But in any case, there is another implied inconsistency here. The extent of galactic exploration 10,000 lightyears in all directions implied by the Technical Manual, and the number of human colonies imply that expansion has occurred unreasonably fast--as if the United States of America were sending a man to the moon in the 1770's. Even with the help of aliens, there are many factors which would make such rapid growth unlikely in only two or three hundred years after 1492. Imagine the reaction if friendly aliens had come along soon after Columbus discovered America and tried to help us set up the United States of America as well as the National Aeronautics and Space administration all at once, in the 1570's. The Prime directive would then be unnecessary--the aliens couldn't change things anyway! Given that it did happen, there must have been very many, very major, and very interesting changes only vaguely hinted at in the series and movies. Decker may be one of the New Humans, but in some ways he's not so new, and we can only assume he's not typical. Or perhaps he only claimed to be one of them, for political and personal purposes? Whatever the reasons, there are some very interesting stories here.

And what's this business of Trelayne looking back 900 years and knowing about Napoleon? And Kirk didn't bat an eye? Perhaps he didn't want to make a scene. But Trelayne must have read the Enterprise data banks very selectively, taking only what he liked. But then at the end of the episode, Kirk accuses Spock of dipping pigtailed into inkwells! That's just as anachronistic; one wonders where Kirk went to school. Little red schoolhouses are all very well, and it would be good if Kirk had visited museums, but I would expect Kirk's school to have a computer at every desk, not inkwells.

Sigma Iotia is 100 light years away, since it took 100 years for the federation to learn what happened to the Horizon. So some 100 years from now there's a ship with a 100-year old book which just happens to be left behind, and its pages are so well preserved that Kirk can leaf through it without breaking the pages. They were rich enough to use the fuel and space to take along a rare old book, but remember what Spock said about the primitive conditions of the warships in the First Romulan war 100 years ago? So maybe it was a colonial expedition launched before the war broke out; so why weren't the colonists recalled, and what happened to them all on the planet?

The animated episodes aren't much help, but they provide an interesting clue to Vulcan history. Starting in order with the live action series:

CONSCIOUS OF THE KING--I think. Spock politely refused McCoy the offer of some brandy, and McCoy says, "Now I know why they were conquered."

IMMUNITY SYNDROME--Spock says Vulcan has never been conquered, and no Vulcan can conceive of a conqueror. Both statements seem unlikely. They're so pacifistic they couldn't turn back a military invasion, although that doesn't guarantee what would happen next. And Spock knows our history well enough to know about Khan, et al. And he understood Khan conquering the ship.

WHOM GODS DESTROY--Spock asks the two Kirks how the Romulans were turned back near Tau Ceti. A dumb way of testing Kirk's identity as Vulcan's son is 40 Eridani. Suppose MIRROR, MIRROR is an alternate universe where Khan won the battle of Oodnadatta, a small town in Australia where there's a spaceport, and the Empire is then established. Space exploration took a different course, the Humans were involved otherwise in the Romulan War(s); Vulcan was conquered by Romulus, but the Romulans were turned back before conquering the Empire. Customs change; Spock is a bit more brutal. Sarek a renegade, Amanda perhaps a spy? Scriptwriters come up with some dumb lines, but they sure do open up interesting questions.

HOW SHARPER THAN A SERPENT'S TOOTH: (animated episode) Vulcan was visited by aliens, and the aliens went away wiser.



The Romulans seem much less mysterious in Dwellers In The Crucible, and Pawns and Symbols gives interesting details on the Klingons. We still aren't told about the Orions, although some gaming books state that the Orions are members of a number of different races.

Other ideas used in the series was the number of very humanoid races, still seen today--although lack of imagination is often as much a problem as a lack of budget. Many of these aliens are just Humans in funny costumes, with warmed-over Human cultures ripe for interference by Our Heroes. Which brings us to the Prime Directive.

The Prime Directive sure seemed like a good idea at the time. Don't interfere with all those nice, quaint customs--unless Kirk has orders to stop the Klingons from invading Organia, or unless they steal Spock's brain, or unless they're being too nasty to the oppressed (the Zeons were being oppressed by the Ekosians--but nobody would dare suggest anything unflattering about Zeon activities! The Ekosians have to be pure evil!) What's to keep Harry Mudd and Cyrano Jones from violating the Prime Directive? And if they're caught, couldn't they claim that interference in a culture is a natural event? Look at the Preservers, and the Organians enforcing the Peace Treaty, and the Vulcans, Klingons, Romulans, Orions, and for sure the Melkotians might have, and the Vians did, and who knows how many other races were interfering with primitives? (And why hasn't anybody written about the First Federation?)

How much interference is too much?

Suppose Uhura is seen in a certain place collecting data, and a native thinks her presence at that time is a fulfillment of a prophecy. Suppose the prophecy says something else instead, but the natives don't remember, or don't care, and start massing for an attack on the tribe next door. Should she let things take their natural course? If she tries to tell the natives what the prophecy really says, is she interfering by telling them? Misinterpretation of prophecy could be a natural part of a culture's development.

And in ERRAND OF MERCY, they beam down in the middle of the village. Weren't they being terribly careless, letting people see them beam down? And why didn't Kirk ask Ayelbourne why the locals were so casual in their response?

The Universal Translator is another good idea gone astray. It's an invisible piece of gadgetry in most episodes, conveniently letting the natives speak English. But there's the problem of the two voices. The natives hear Kirk say, "I'm Captain

Kirk,"; the translator has to wait for the end of the sentence so it can put the proper name in its correct position in the local language: "Kirk dkl'==;]{agh jagk." Even if the locals know about the translator, somebody's sure to make remarks, but they never do.

The transporter beam was shredded in one of the Best of Trek books; why can't they rearrange the atoms in trash and turn it into dilithium? Perhaps it requires too much fine-tuning. But then the Genesis Project makes it appear that now they can. Or can they? Some imaginary thing called protomatter is necessary, and it's unstable, so maybe they can't after all. The writers still appear to be using the beam as an excuse for artificial excitement; the disaster in the first movie should have been averted by using the shuttle. Originally, the producers thought the beam would be quicker than the shuttle, but now that the shuttle has been established, there should be no more problems with using the beam.

Another good device was the tricorder, which has also been transmogrified. I've only seen it once in the movies. In the WRATH OF KHAN, Saavik has one, and it looks quite different, bent in two, and with a heavy handle in back. The handle makes sense, but I wonder if the blueprints make as much sense as the originals do in the Technical Manual.

Stardates are fascinating; it's fun to figure out the average stardate, and try to decide intuitively what stardates go with the five episodes which don't have stardates (OMEGA GLORY is one; 1413.2; MIRROR, MIRROR, possible 4150 or so;). But there are still inconsistencies. In one of the novels, somebody is told a stardate and knows immediately that was twenty years ago. Geoffrey Mandel, who helped with the Medical Manual, had an article on Kilostardates, which are more consistent than regular stardates; Kilostardates are affected by relativity, and are based on a standard calendar.

The Federation is supposed to be a nice wonderful place with all in harmony, although there still have to be bad guys to cause all the excitement. One of the interesting scenes was in SAVAGE CURTAIN, where Lincoln calls Uhura a "lovely Negress", and immediately apologizes for using the wrong word. There's another word for Negroes, which was perfectly acceptable in Lincoln's time, and the network censors wouldn't have dared let Lincoln use that word on the air--thus completely ignoring the point of the scene. Actually, Uhura probably thinks of herself as a Bantu, just as Cherokees think of themselves as Cherokees and not Indians.

The one time Chekov gets a girl, she has blue skin and he doesn't like her--and doesn't even kiss her. Kirk's girls are all fair-skinned, except maybe Miramanee, and even she wasn't terribly dark. The one time Kirk kissed a black, he was being forced to. Almost all the aliens were played by whites. In LET THAT BE YOUR LAST BATTLEFIELD one of the actors, Frank Gorshin, is white, and the other probably was white, too.. Frank Gorshin didn't even do one of his famous accents. Since Vulcan is such a hot planet, the actor playing Spock should have been black, or at least brown. I know Roddenberry always wanted to cast Leonard Nimoy as an alien, but after thousands of years on Vulcan the locals might be expected to have darker skin. Star Trek still uses mostly white actors; Joachim went from brown to white, and Ilia seems white.

Originally, the Enterprise wasn't supposed to visit good ol' Terra, since Roddenberry didn't want to speculate what it would be like. But now that restriction's been dropped, for reasons nobody seems to have articulated. Now that we have the money, we might as well build the sets.

Another no-no: in The Making of Star Trek, we read a memo in which Roddenberry states that he would like to use names familiar to the audience, and not ones like Eta Cassiopeae, or HR 8832. Makes sense. So what planets do we visit later? Beta III in Star System C-111. Gamma 7. Hokay. Beta III is obviously the third planet of the second sun of a binary, catalog number C-111. Beta Niobe is the second of a binary. That one was a nova, and it was a perfect opportunity to use a real star name, since there are several stars we know of which might go nova someday soon. Actually, a lot of those planets do have nice names--Typesrias, (sounds like Kirk's middle name); Argona II is mentioned at the end of A

TASTE OF ARMAGEDDON; Triskelion. There must be a reason for the name of Planet Q-- why couldn't that be worked into a story?

Ninety percent of the galaxy is unexplored; that isn't really contradicted by anything, but then Pike tells the Talosians he comes from the other end of the galaxy.

•••

The Enterprise may be replaced by the "Pregnant Pelican", the Excelsior; I haven't had a good look at the deck plans yet. But I like it--it's brightly lit, the uniforms are decent. There must have been some terrible military problem which made the Enterprise a dingy warship in the first movie, and I think the problem has passed, since the second movie has some new changes. The transporter room is certainly much better in the second movie, although they didn't let us get a good look at the console.

The bridge is better; there are two turbolifts and stairs, but there are no seats around the perimeter of the bridge in the first movie--presumably to keep the crew awake, but that doesn't really make much sense. The second two movies work out about even--there are equal amounts of things improved and not. The number of ships in the fleet has certainly increased, from 12 main ships to 400+ in the Technical Manual.

As for the storylines, The Making of Star Trek lists a number: The Enterprise crew can represent their government (ALL OUR YESTERDAYS); protect UFP interests (I, MUDD); regulate trade (TRIBBLES); make trade agreements (FRIDAY'S CHILD); fight bush wars (A PRIVATE LITTLE WAR); apprehend illegal traders, slave traders (MUDD'S WOMEN; PIRATES OF ORION); lend aid to scientific expeditions (NAKED TIME, DEVIL IN THE DARK, EMPATH); exploration (CORBOMITE MANEUVER); diplomatic exchanges and affairs (JOURNEY TO BABEL, AMOK TIME); search for lost explorers (WHAT ARE LITTLE GIRLS MADE OF); helping stranded travelers (no episode really fits this one very well); one not mentioned in the list was spying--ENTERPRISE INCIDENT. Lesser ships are mentioned, which would do commercial ventures, surveys, archaeological and medical assignments, most of which the Enterprise also did.

Gerrold criticizes the writers for setting up situations with no real dilemmas. Kirk's choice in CITY ON THE EDGE OF FOREVER is difficult, but Spock's in TOMORROW IS YESTERDAY is nonexistent--there's no real conflict. Gerrold much prefers CITY, but even in that one the viewer knows the series hasn't been canceled, Kirk will be back next week. The episode is more dramatic, with dramatically fewer inconsistencies, but Kirk's choice is just as foregone.

Kirk should have made the connection between Veger and Nomad, but even if he did it's hard to see how that would have made things any easier for him. Perhaps he did and simply didn't tell anyone. And in the next two movies, we're just along for the ride again. They wouldn't dare kill off any of the main characters. The movies are fun, but they still haven't gotten around to telling us much new about the Star Trek universe, although the novelization do somewhat.

•••

All in all, the Star Trek universe has filled out, expanded; it seems more inhabited, more familiar, a place we'd all like to visit and live in. Spock is more willing to show his emotions, although I should think the Veger Revelation should have been anticipated by contact with the Organians, Metrons, and others, and that it would have had a major effect on Vulcan culture. Kirk is getting older, and maybe he should be the governor of a colony (the TV series wouldn't be as expensive). McCoy and Scott haven't changed much. Uhura should be getting her own command any day now. Hasn't Chapel gotten married to somebody, maybe some other Vulcan?? Did Janice Rand marry Riley? We keep going back, wanting to learn more, even though we don't always find out very much; we can always read between the lines, and find things the producers didn't know were there.





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DIALOGUE IN THE CLOUDS

No one asked you to come here.
Oh, yes they did.

It wasn't me.
I never said it was.

We don't need your help.
Sure -- you're happy being planet-bound.

We can take what we want
without your interference
You're the one who woke me with a
weapon at my throat.

You're to be an example,
a victim that cannot be ignored.
Yeah, murder's a great way to gain
public approval for your cause.

Our public is our cause.
Which public?

My people are the only public
that matters.
What about the cloud dwellers?

They will take our place in the caves.
Then you'll still have two separate
worlds.

It's time they had a taste of our life.
Have you never considered sharing
your two worlds?

City dwellers share? Hah!
When did you last try reason instead
of force?

Never -- we don't waste time in idle talk.
And what would you do in the sky world
if you win?

Have an easier life, of course.
Then what makes you so different
from the cloud dwellers?

Well, in that way, we're not.
My point exactly.

But how can we prove it to them?
Let me help.

I don't need your help.
"I"? What happened to "we"?

Go away, offworlder, and let us
solve our own problems
I can't -- you've made it impossible
for us to leave now.

-- Ellen Hulley

Requiem for Fools

An immortal man of stone
hopes to hold all time for love ...
death survives

Golden youth, compelled by love
cares naught for infinity ...
life abides

Age is lost in war with youth
youth is lost in time to love ...
neither wins

-- Ellen Hulley



THE LIGHTER SIDE OF STAR TREK



THE E-TEAM

LAVENA KAY
KID00/84

THE E TEAM

BY STEPHEN
MENDENHALL

A number of fans have speculated that after their inevitable (??) court martial, Kirk & Co. will become free-lance trouble shooters for Starfleet. This may be a bit difficult, since they are so well-known throughout the Galaxy, and if lowly fans can think of the idea, then many of the galactic civilizations of the ST universe may suspect the same thing.

The best and easiest compromise is disguise, just as Kirk did in his short-lived Barbary Coast adventures. That wasn't William Shatner, that was Kirk stranded in the past. But seriously, if Kirk and the others are going to wear disguises, they won't be recognizable. Some fans wouldn't mind other actors playing the roles--many have played Hamlet, after all. So at the beginning and end of each episode we would see William Shatner and the others, but in the middle, the main part of each adventure might have many--er, guest stars. For example, Shatner wanted to direct the next movie, so we would have something like this:

STAR TREK V THE NAKED CURTAIN The E-Team is assigned to rescue a Federation diplomat from Orion slavers who have been stranded on a primitive planet. The diplomat, a Catullan woman who disapproves of Starfleet, can't know that Kirk is anywhere around, so--Sylvester Stallone appears as Captain Kirk, disguised as a Han Solo type. Barbara Streisand as Spock; according to the plan, Spock has to be very persuasive, and the diplomat would be even more persuaded by a woman. Dolly Parton as Uhura, who is disguised as a yellow Orion slave girl. In some adventures, perhaps the others don't have any major disguises, so the regular actors play the roles.

STAR TREK VI THE BALANCE OF THE WAY Directed by DeForest Kelley, takes us to a nice little planet with plantations all around, and a mysterious plague apparently taken there by Klingon merchants disguised as Tellarites. McCoy takes the place of one of the local plantation owners, who insists on it for complicated reasons. Katherine Helmond as McCoy, Farrah Fawcett as Chapel.

STAR TREK VII If you'll buy that, maybe you'll buy THE DARK WAY OF PEACE, also directed by DeForest Kelley, in which the entire team is trapped inside an abandoned Klingon starbase now used as a monastery, and to escape they must all disguise themselves, with the help of the monks, and they thereby turn the tables on their Orion captors. George Peppard as Kirk, Dirk Benedict as Spock, Dwight Schultz as McCoy, maybe. I dunno who Mr. T. would be. Scott? Diana Ross as Uhura and Bo Derek as Chapel?

STAR TREK VIII directed by James Doohan, titled THE DARK BALANCE OF KOR, takes us to a Klingon potlatch on a Klingon colony world, where the Team must prevent Kor from being assassinated by a Klingon prince, and prevent a massive galactic war

which could engulf the Federation. Halfway through the movie, the team's disguises are uncovered; Bill Cosby as Kirk, George Hamilton as Spock, Tom Bosley as McCoy. Arnold Schwarzenegger as Scott—we've never seen Scott's bare chest before, and the inconsistency in height can be disguised with clever camera angles.

STAR TREK IX, directed by Walter Koenig; CURTAINS OF LIGHT takes us to wintry Kadth IV, a colony settled by both Klingon and Human outcasts, who have set up a society modeled on old Russia before the Revolution, and where there is a Klingon spy attempting to foment revolution and bring the planet into the empire. James B. Sikking as Kirk, Daniel J. Travanti as McCoy, Veronica Hamel as Chapel, Betty Thomas as Uhura, Charles Haid as Scott, Bruce Weitz as Chekov, and Kiel Martin as Sulu.

STAR TREK X, directed by George Takei, WITHIN THE CAMP OF DOOM; the ancient planet Archernar IX, settled by Vulcan outcasts before they got to Romulus, resembled Old Japan only slightly; there is a Dark and Terrible Secret which the Team must uncover, with Pat Morita as Sulu.

STAR TREK XI, directed by Nichelle Nichols, THE LAMP OF THE TORT, is on an African veldt region of a long-lost colony planet in the Romulan Empire; why are the Romulans hiding the truth about the apparently harmless quadrupeds of the forests? And why did the Romulans specifically ask the E-Team to come investigate? Here, the actors appear both in and out of disguises throughout. Burt Reynolds as Kirk, Jimmy Stewart as Spock, Ernest Borgnine as McCoy, Billy Dee Williams as Chekov, Shari Harper-Belafonte as Uhura.

More ST movies follow, directed by the same or other actors, and eventually they get so much money accumulated that they start their own cable network.

Trelane

Just when I was havin' fun,
They made me go away!
I liked my game. I woulda won
If they had let me stay!

I never had any fun before!
My planet sure was great!
Heck, I was gonna play some more!
It wasn't all that late!

Those Humans didn't like my game;
They tried to run and hide!
I caught them, but my parents came
And made me go inside!

They said my Humans had to go,
And gosh, they sure were mad!
Well, how was I supposed to know
That what I did was bad?

-- Elaine Sheppard



AN UPLIFTING TALE

BY LYNDA GARRAHER

Author's Note: The following is a story I entered in a writing contest for Space Trek II in St. Louis in 1983. Since Walter Koenig and Jimmy Doohan were among the guests, the rules of the contest required that the story be a Chekov-Scotty vignette. First prize was "performance" of the masterpiece by the two actors.

No, I didn't win. I can attribute that sad fact only to BLATANT FAVORITISM!! on the part of the judges. At any rate, here 'tis.

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(As the scene opens, we find Mr. Scott alone in a tiny, featureless cubicle which yet manages to look somehow familiar. He is gesturing rather urgently to Ensign Chekov, who scoots into the cubicle with him, scant seconds ahead of a pair of sliding doors.)

SCOTT: Are ye all right, lad?

CHEKOV: (pats himself; checks): I think so. Those doors are vicious! and these are the slowest turbolifts--

SCOTT: Elevators, Pavel! Elevators! An ye dinna stop muckin' aboot wi' the language, ye'll blow our kiver.

CHEKOV: Look who's talking about language, you Cossack! And who modified the video machine in the bar last night?

SCOTT: Just tryin' to keep my hand in!

CHEKOV: But a six-foot hologram of Ms. Pac-Man? Chasing the band through the lobby?

SCOTT: 'Twas a perfectly logical mistake. Doubtless she thought they were strawberries.

CHEKOV: Logical! Now you sound like Mr. Spock. . . .Where is he, anyway?

SCOTT: The last time I saw him, he was demonstratin' the Vulcan nerve pinch to a dozen or so lassies wi' the most remarkable superstructures...

CHEKOV: Same old story. Senior officers get all the fun.

SCOTT: Fun is no' why we're here, lad. Remember that. Time travel is serious business. And if we canna locate Captain Kirk's great-great-great-great grandmother an' convince her to go home to her husband, we're all in the haggis.

CHEKOV: You're sure the Guardian of Forever was right? That there's a Klingon time-traveler here, too, trying to keep this -- what was her name?

SCOTT: Sara Sue.

CHEKOV: You're sure it wasn't Mary S--

SCOTT: SARA!

CHEKOV: Whatever. You think he might really convince her to run away with him?
 SCOTT: The Guardian says he will, unless we find her an' convince her otherwise.
 CHEKOV: It's hopeless, Mr. Scott. There must be hundreds of women here who fit her general description. And we can't just keep going around reading name tags! I got thrown out of the hospitality room three times today trying to read tags.
 SCOTT: I told you not to try to use braille!
 CHEKOV: Well, it seemed like a good idea at the time.
 SCOTT: The cheap vodka is blurrin' your judgment, lad. Now for a real idea, it takes an engineer every time.
 CHEKOV: So what's your great idea, Mr. Scott? I don't see anything so spectacular about this tur-- Elevator. Just all those little buttons lit up -- and we haven't even stopped yet.
 SCOTT: We will. Soon. Ye hafta ken the rules, Pavel. 'Twas all in the orientation tape.
 CHEKOV: They have rules at these conventions?
 SCOTT: Aye. Rule One is that the guest of honor always cancels out at the last minute. Rule two is that the two panels you want most to see are always scheduled at the same time. Rule Three--
 CHEKOV: The elevators, Mr. Scott! The elevators?
 SCOTT: I'm just comin' to that one. Rule Three is that sooner or later durin' every con, there'll only be one elevator operatin'. I just made sure it was sooner, that's all.
 CHEKOV: You mean ... this is the only elevator that's working?
 SCOTT: Aye.
 CHEKOV: And everybody who wants to go anywhere will have to use this one?
 SCOTT: Aye.
 CHEKOV: All those women ... here?
 SCOTT (smiling): Aye.
 CHEKOV: Even the ones with the ... superstructures?
 SCOTT: Aye.
 CHEKOV: And the ones with the teensy-weensy costumes...?
 SCOTT (smiles dreamily): Aye.
 CHEKOV (finally getting it): And we'll be here . . . with them . . . alone . . . in this tiny . . . little . . . slow . . . little . . .
 SCOTT (firmly): Aye.
 CHEKOV (beaming): Mr. Scott, you're a genius!
 SCOTT: That I am, lad. That I am.

Competition

There once was a Scot and a Russian,
 Who both had a terrible crush on
 The same cute young thing,
 But the Scotsman could sing,
 Thus the matter was closed to discussion.

— Vera Cacciatore

CHEKOV'S DAYDREAM

BY DEBORAH GOBY

The transporter sparkled and sung and Chekov materialized on the receiving disc.

"Hi, George," he said, stepping off the platform. "So you lost the draw, huh?"

"Yeah," the ensign behind the console said, "but it's not so bad. Things are pretty quiet, with just the refit crew down in Engineering, so I've been catching up on my reading."

"Technical manuals, I suppose?"

"Are you kidding?" George lifted a garishly illustrated magazine above the edge of the console.

"Ah, 'Ghost Stories of the Galaxy'." Chekov grinned, "I should haf known. Say, haf I ever told you about the famous Russian--"

"Yes, several times, ever since you discovered my predilection for ghost stories," George interrupted ruthlessly, grinning in return. "Say, what are you doing here, anyway? You're on leave."

"I got invited to a party, so I came back to get a special bottle I've been saving for a party. Rigellian vodka," Chekov shook his head regretfully. "Of course, it's not anything like real Russian vodka, but it vill haf to do."

"Well, you'd better get your bottle or you'll be late for your party. Have a good time," George saluted with his magazine.

"Thanks, I vill be thinking of you," Chekov said as George opened the magazine and began reading again.

"Oh, don't worry about me," he replied abstractedly, "this'll keep me occupied until my shift ends."

In his cabin, Chekov glanced at the time readout blinking in the corner of his screen. He had some time to kill before the party started. Bottle in hand, he went out into the corridor and stood in front of his door, wondering what to do. As he stood there, he became aware of the unnatural silence. He had never before been aboard the Enterprise when no one else was there. Moved by a sudden impulse, he headed down the corridor to the turbolift and told it to take him to the bridge.

As the lift doors closed behind him, he set his bottle down on the floor, stood up and looked around. The bridge looked different, with all the consoles empty and the captain's chair unoccupied. Slowly he walked around the raised perimeter, touching the consoles and chairs, stopping now and then to study the various control panels. As he walked, his eyes kept straying to the command chair. When he had completed the circuit, he went slowly down the steps and stood in front of the chair. For a minute he studied his and Sulu's consoles, then he turned to look at the chair. Carefully he stepped up and sat in it, wiggling a little to get

comfortable. Then he turned the chair around, seeing what the rest of the bridge looked like from that position. So this was what it felt like. He completed turning and stopped, facing the screen. His imagination took over.

Slowly, in his mind's eye, the bridge came to life, all the stations manned by the proper people, all the instruments alive with lights. He looked at the screen again. What could he see there? An unexplored planet, an asteroid swarm, a space anomaly? Perhaps a trading vessel or colony ship, even an alien ship? Ah ha! He had it. A Romulan warship loomed on the screen, approaching cautiously.

Now fully caught up in the scene unfolding in his mind, he closed the arms of the chair. He turned it slightly to the left to hear Sulu say, "They're continuing to approach, Captain."

"What do you suppose they want?" Ensign Tallchief asked from the navigator's station.

"I don't know," he replied, "but I am sure we will find out."

"I'm receiving a signal now," Lieutenant Uhura called from behind him. "Shall I reply, sir?"

"Not yet," he answered. "Sensor readings, Mr. Spock?"

Totally unaware that he had spoken aloud, he nearly fell out of the chair when Spock's voice sounded audibly over his shoulder, "Scanning now, Captain."

Chekov spun the chair to see Mr. Spock, in the flesh, sitting at the science console. He had been so involved in his imagination that he hadn't heard the lift doors close or the soft footsteps behind him.

"V-what are you doing here, sir?" he stammered, a fiery blush beginning to cover his cheeks.

"Like you, I had to return to the ship for something I needed, Mr. Chekov," Spock replied. He considered the distinctly uncomfortable ensign, now almost visibly squirming in the captain's chair. "There is no reason for you to be embarrassed, Ensign; role-playing is a perfectly acceptable method of preparing oneself for the future. You do intend to be a starship commander, do you not?" He raised an eyebrow quizzically.

"Yes, sir," Chekov answered faintly.

Spock continued, "You could have chosen no better man for a role model than our captain. Jim Kirk is the finest commander under whom I have served."

"That is true, sir," Chekov agreed with a nod.

"Incidentally, Mr. Chekov," Spock smiled slightly, "You might like to know that the captain has been pleased with the performance of your duties in the last few weeks."

"Th--thank you, sir," the ensign stammered, blushing again.

"Now, I must obtain the information I returned for and you should be going to your party." Spock turned to his console and keyed up the display. "And, Mr. Chekov ..."

"Yes, sir?"

"Don't forget your bottle."



Eternally Ensign?

by Isabell Klein

"Sorry, sir," the lieutenant reported, "but there is no record of a promotion recommendation for an Ensign Chekov."

"That's impossible, Lieutenant. I submitted it several months ago. Would you please check again?" James Kirk successfully masked his irritation, making use of charm he so easily turned on and off as the occasion demanded.

He leaned against the counter separating him from the rest of the facility, glancing idly about while he waited. He had been in hundreds of identical rooms all over the galaxy. McCoy had once suggested that all fleet offices were prefab, complete with old notices on bulletin boards, scratches on the furniture, and the odd half-finished cup of cold coffee.

The young lieutenant looked up from her terminal, shaking her head rather sadly he thought as she reconfirmed that a promotion request for an Ensign Chekov may have gone somewhere, but Starbase 10 was not the place.

"Is there something else I can do for you, Captain?"

"Can you put a tracer on it for me?" he asked, flashing the famous Kirk grin.

"If you'll fill out form SFP 16-23 -- Request for Investigation of Apparent Non-Receipt of Official Document, I'll put it through channels for you."

Kirk shook his head in growing frustration. He had already completed Form SFP 07-17 -- Request for Access to Classified Material, SFP 16-09 -- Request for Authorization for Access to Personnel Records, SFP 16-46 -- Request for Verification of Disposition of a Recommendation for Promotion, and SFP 17-32 -- Verification of Identity of Enquirer and did not readily anticipate completing yet another form. Besides, he'd get a lot further using his own contacts. He glanced at the wall chronometer. If he didn't hurry he'd be late for a briefing scheduled for all command rank officers of ships currently in port.

"No, Lieutenant, not at the moment. And thanks for your help."

"Anytime, Captain Kirk, anytime." She all but oozed helpfulness.

Kirk found Spock in the corridor studying a chess problem posted on one of the bulletin boards. One raised eyebrow silently enquired about Kirk's success.

"Personnel doesn't have any record of the promotion request. It probably went somewhere by mistake. I'll check further and resubmit at the same time. If I were Chekov I'd be pretty sick and tired of being an ensign by now."

Although Spock nodded in reply, Kirk could see his attention was elsewhere.

"What's so interesting about that particular chess problem?" Kirk asked curiously.

"There is no way white can mate in four moves. Five, yes, but four, no."

"Going to tell them?" Kirk asked impishly. "Or let them figure it out for

themselves?"

"I doubt there will be time if we are not to be late for the briefing."

"Nice to get a copy of that problem though, and post it in the rec room. Drive the crew nuts!"

"I see no good reason to do such a thing, Captain, if I understand your use of the term 'nuts' correctly."

With a wry shrug, Kirk turned away and started down the corridor. "Just a thought, Mr. Spock, just a thought."

The meeting was the latest in the long line of staff meetings Kirk had sat through over the years. He found himself doing mental nip-ups in an effort to stay reasonably alert. What he considered important — new crew assignments, new orders — had already been handled. Commodore S'nd'rs'n was going over the latest rules and regs issued by Starfleet Command.

Kirk's mind kept wandering to what he was beginning to think of as the Chekov problem, his inattention aided by the soft, monotonous drone of the Commodore's voice. Kirk knew he had transmitted the promotion request — one of several he had forwarded to Fleet several months ago. The other promotions were making their steady way through the maze of bureaucracy, and only Chekov's seemed to be lost.

"... seem to have an unusually high number of ensigns who have not yet been promoted," S'nd'rs'n was saying. "Therefore effective stardate 2347.6, Starfleet Headquarters, ensigns who have not been promoted to the rank of lieutenant after completing three years of post-Academy service will be separated from the Service."

The statement captured Kirk's attention. He quickly exchanged glances with Spock, who clearly shared his concern. Chekov!

"How soon are these regulations to be implemented?" asked Captain Maureen McGinnis of the Yorktown.

"Immediately, Mo."

"What about pending promotions?" Kirk asked. If Chekov's didn't come through--

"If the time limit has expired and the promotion is denied, then that individual is subject to the new regulations."

"Even if we lose valuable officers?"

"If they were that valuable, Jim, they wouldn't still be ensigns."

There were murmured exchanges among those seated in the room. Fleet's reasoning was difficult to argue with, but almost all of the captains had an ensign or two in jeopardy. The base commander would soon be buried in an avalanche of promotion recommendations.

There was little further business and the meeting adjourned with the usual offers of drinks at one of the local watering holes — often in payment for some intership wagering.

Mo McGinnis accosted Kirk, demanding settlement of a debt of rather long standing. "And, with interest," McGinnis added without much enthusiasm. An athletic woman tall enough to look Kirk in the eye, she was also bright, tough and willing to take the necessary risks to complete her assignments. She also had the reputation as one of the all-time great poker players in fleet history. McGinnis and Kirk had a teasing friendship, developed over years of years of running into each other from one end of the Federation to the other. At one time Kirk had pursued Mo with an eye to a more intimate relationship, but he finally accepted reluctant defeat and settled into attempting to defeat her when they met in war games. The score was about even.

Kirk, correctly interpreting McGinnis' mood as concern over the new regulation, asked, "How many?"

"One in particular — an engineer. She'll be designing the next generation of starships unless I miss my guess and I can't get her promoted. This is the second time, and I can't even get any information on the request."

"Mine's a navigator — best I've ever seen. Probably the only chief navigator in the fleet who's still an ensign. Will make captain someday, I'd even bet you on that. You've been to Personnel."

McGinnis nodded. "'Complete forms SFP 07-16, 16-09, 16-46, and 17-32, please,' which I did, and the lieutenant couldn't find my ensign's promotion anywhere in her computer."

Kirk nodded. "And then she asked you to fill out form SFP 16-23 to check further and you didn't because you figured you could get an answer quicker on your own. Did you?"

"Not yet. Haven't had a chance to try."

"Captain," Spock said and both captains turned toward him.

With a grin, Mo McGinnis said, "I think he's yours."

Kirk nodded.

"With your permission, Captain, I shall return to the ship. I have some work--"

"Of course, Spock. White in four, wasn't it?" Kirk asked innocently.

Affronted Vulcan sensibility stiffened Spock's erect bearing more than usual. "Captain?" he asked as if seeking clarification, when they both knew that the chess problem was indeed the main reason Spock wished to return to the ship.

"Permission granted. And Spock," Kirk added as an afterthought, "forward a copy of Chekov's promotion to the Base Visiting Officers Quarters. I'll be spending the night ashore."

"Acknowledged, Captain."

As Spock walked away using that easy stride which looked casual but could eat up miles, McGinnis said, "I didn't know you could tease a Vulcan."

"You can't," Kirk deadpanned as he led the way to the nearest bar, McGinnis at his heels.

Several drinks later, the two captains were still undecided as to the best method of handling Starfleet's latest mandate.

"Some desk-bound admiral's idea of efficiency," McGinnis was saying for the fourth time. "If they spent any time out on the line, they'd know what was important in this man's fleet and what wasn't. And even I can't protect Ensign Katten from getting kicked out! And all she's done is one of the best engineering jobs I've ever seen -- fabricated a by-pass circuit from string and wire when we were hit with our shields down. Practically saved the ship single-handedly. But you can't convince the brass, who've spent all their time planetside. It's not fair, Jamie, love."

Kirk nodded. "I never saw anybody learn a navigation board as fast as Chekov, and in the middle of war games, yet. I'd swear he never saw one like it until he stood his first watch, not that he'd admit it. Even Spock was impressed."

"And we're going to lose them under the new regs."

Kirk took another sip of the rather exotic combination of spirits McGinnis had ordered for them both. Kirk, feeling a bit woozy, would get his revenge on the next round.

"Keptin! Keptin Kirk!"

Kirk looked toward the door. There was only one person who called him Keptin.

"Keptin!" Chekov charged the table. "I demand to know why I have been kicked out," he said, his breath coming in slight gasps as if he had been running.

Kirk and McGinnis exchanged looks before Kirk pulled out a chair and motioned the irate Russian to sit.

"You know Captain McGinnis," he said.

Chekov didn't -- but he also didn't care. "I think I informed should be about why this has happened."

Chekov's lapse in grammar prompted Kirk to ask, "How was the vodka, Ensign?"

"I could not get any vodka. I could not get any anything! Starfleet has no record of me. No record, no money. I demand to know why this has happened!" he repeated.

"Easy, Ensign," Kirk soothed. He signaled to the waitress and ordered a vodka for Chekov. That much he could do.

"Now," Kirk quizzed, "what do you mean, Starfleet has no record of you?"

The vodka arrived and Chekov tried to drink it in one swallow. Kirk put out

his hand to restrain him; an inebriated ensign would be of little help.

"I put my Starfleet ID into the automatic credit machine for money for my shore leave," Chekov said very carefully. "The machine refused to give me any money, said that I had no account with Starfleet. That there was no record of me."

He finished the drink, gulping the potent liquid and signaled for another.

"And?" Kirk prompted, anxious to hear the rest of the story.

"And I contacted Personnel and they said I was not a member of Starfleet. I said I was and she said I wasn't. And she was a lieutenant," he finished as if that explained everything.

"The lieutenant told you that you had no record?" Kirk asked.

Chekov nodded, morosely. "I don't even know what I did. All I ever wanted to be was a starship captain."

"You haven't done anything, and you're still a member of my crew," Kirk reassured him. At least as far as I know, he added to himself.

Kirk handed Chekov some of his own money. "Here, have a good time," he said.

"But I couldn't, Keptin," Chekov protested.

"With it, you can," Kirk replied with a grin. "But be back on board on time or the interest on the loan may prove higher than expected."

"Off you go, Ensign," McGinnis told him. "You'll get a bad reputation hanging around with the brass."

"Thank you, Keptin. I shall do as ordered and with pleasure." Chekov grabbed the money and disappeared from the bar.

"I'll bet he has a good time," McGinnis commented.

"You'd bet on anything!" Kirk reminded her.

"Only sure things, and what ensign doesn't have a good time on shore leave. Pity to have to promote him."

Kirk threw McGinnis a dirty look and rose from the table. "I'm off to find out why the Starfleet computer no longer thinks Chekov is one of us."

"Starting with the lieutenant?"

"Starting with the lieutenant," Kirk agreed.

"Think I'll tag along, Jamie. I have a hunch my ensign is having the same problems, and if I solve the problem before it materializes, my aura of command infallibility is enhanced."

Kirk laughed. No one in the fleet needed additional infallibility less than Maureen McGinnis. Her crew would follow her to hell and back and some of the missions assigned the Yorktown had been just that.

"Come on then, Supercaptain, let's go beard the fearsome lieutenant in her den."

The lieutenant recognized them both and flashed her best lieutenant-to-captain smile.

"Yes, sirs. What can I do for you this time?"

Kirk turned on the charm and the diplomacy. Mo McGinnis turned away in a hasty attempt to hid the grin threatening to light her features.

"I think you'll remember that I was in here earlier inquiring about the pending promotion of one Ensign Pavel Chekov?" Kirk began, continuing when she nodded. "I met Ensign Chekov a few minutes ago and he tells me that there is no record of him. Would you please check with your computer?"

"Of course, Captain." She fiddled with the terminal for a while, then looked up. "That is correct — there is no record of an Ensign Pavel Chekov serving anywhere in Starfleet, Captain."

"Lieutenant," Kirk said with false patience, "since Ensign Chekov has served on my ship for almost three years and since he sits directly in front of me on the bridge, I should know whether or not Ensign Chekov is a member of Starfleet, don't you agree?"

"Yes, Captain—"

"Then I suggest you check the ship's roster of the U.S.S. Enterprise. You should find Ensign Chekov listed as Chief Navigator." Kirk's growing frustration was not helped by Mo McGinnis' obvious enjoyment of the situation.

Again, the lieutenant studied her screen. "There is no Pavel Chekov listed on any Starfleet ship roster. And, I can find no record of a U.S.S. Enterprise."

McGinnis finally let that grin into the open. "Serves you right for having a Vulcan computer expert as first officer," she needled Kirk. "Probably decided he needed more meditation time, and if the ship didn't exist in the computer banks, no orders could be issued which might disturb him."

Kirk nudged her to silence with an elbow. "Lieutenant," he said quietly, trying another approach, "would you please check one more record -- James T. Kirk."

"Of course, Captain," she said brightly. Then, after a slight pause, "There are three James T. Kirk's serving in the fleet."

McGinnis found that amusing. "I thought you were unique," she whispered seductively.

Kirk studiously ignored her as the lieutenant asked, "Do you want the record of the lieutenant or one of the ensigns?"

"I want the record of the captain," Kirk snapped.

"But there is no Captain James T. Kirk," was the clam reply.

Kirk's face darkened and he was about to let fly with a few words guaranteed to let this lieutenant know that there was indeed a Captain Kirk, when Mo McGinnis spoke up. "First your navigator, then your ship, now you!"

With a look in McGinnis' direction calculated to quash a lesser mortal, Kirk suggested, "Why don't you try, Captain? Perhaps the Yorktown's been decommissioned also."

McGinnis' confidence was soon shattered by the maddeningly pleasant voice at the computer console. Captain McGinnis, her ship and her entire crew were missing as well.

"How does it feel to be dispossessed?" Kirk asked. "And out of--?"

He stopped suddenly. "If there is no Enterprise and no Yorktown, then there are no ships--"

"--on Neutral Zone patrol, at least as far as the computers are concerned, and no one to notify in case of an intrusion," McGinnis completed Kirk's thought.

Both captains immediately had their communicators out and were talking to their ships, ordering them out of orbit and on red alert before they were trapped by the defense shields. Then Kirk was pushing his way beyond the counter, alerting the base defense system and the base commander's office.

Red alert was already sounding throughout the facility and even the lieutenant was calmly going about the business of shutting down her office and going to her emergency station. She pushed the two captains out of the office, securing the access and hurrying to her station.

Kirk and McGinnis stared at each other. No one was more useless than a ship's captain away from his ship during a red alert. And here on the base, neither had an assigned task. Without speaking they headed for the base command center where at least they could observe whatever happened.

However, nothing did happen. No Romulan warships attacked Federation space. No Klingons arrived to disturb the even temper of Starbase life. More problems were caused by the excessive number of command rank officers stranded at the starbase when their ships left orbit than by any enemy threat.

Among them were Captains James Kirk and Maureen McGinnis, who paced their way through the red alert, occasionally bumping into each other in the process.

"That's your side of the room," McGinnis complained as she and Kirk once again collided.

"I should be with my ship," Kirk grumbled. "They shouldn't have to go out alone."

"I know what you mean," McGinnis agreed. "No matter how good I know they are, I still want to be with them." After again ending up in Kirk's arms after colliding, she snapped, "Keep to your own side of the room, will ya?" She took another few steps and then mumbled, "I wish I knew where they were right now."

The two captains continued pacing and worrying until offered the chance to relieve base personnel who were monitoring long distance sensors. It made them

feel less useless, but didn't do much to stop their concern about their ships and their crews.

Eventually, the red alert was canceled, and the ships returned for their stranded crews. The technicians puzzled over the problems of the disappearance of the two starships from computer records. And Kirk returned to the Enterprise as soon as she attained orbit.

Spock and McCoy were waiting for him in the transporter room.

"'Bout time you showed up," McCoy grumbled. "Fine thing -- the captain missing his own recall."

Kirk ignored him, turning instead to his first officer. "Ship's status, Mr. Spock," Kirk snapped.

"All systems manned and operations with one-third of the crew present and accounted for. We encountered no hostilities. We are proceeding to recall crew members as fast as they can be located. Estimated time to completion is four point five hours."

Kirk was already on the way to the bridge, his quick strides making short work of the route to the turbolift.

"Mr. Spock," he stated, "as far as the base computers are concerned, neither the Enterprise nor the Yorktown nor their crews exist. Any theories?"

"A computer malfunction, obviously, but I would need more data upon which to base further speculation."

"I think this is where I get off," McCoy muttered. "Now it's not enough that we can be wiped out by the Klingons or the Romulans or even our own transporters, but the base computer has to get into the act as well. What happened to good old human error? Why must everything be caused by machine malfunction?"

"Bones, you sound as if you prefer to die by the hand of man rather than by machine."

"Damn right, Jim,"

"Let us hope neither event occurs."

"Point taken, Captain," McCoy acknowledged.

Later, as Kirk was going over Spock's log entries during the alert, Maureen McGinnis signaled from the Yorktown.

"Jim, S'nd'rs'n wants to see us. I told him I'd call you. Base central in fifteen minutes?"

"Affirmative, Mo. Any idea what it's about?"

"If I did, think I'd tell you?"

Kirk laughed. "Probably not. Fifteen minutes. Kirk out."

They met in ten. "We've got to stop meeting like this," Mo intoned softly with a grin.

"Yeah, my crew's beginning to talk," Kirk replied as they headed toward S'nd'rs'n's office.

"Worse yet, my crew's opened a betting pool on how long it will last."

"Remind me never to play poker with you."

"You don't now," McGinnis complained. "Not after my lovely fours over deuces full house," she reminisced.

"You wiped me out that night, if you'll remember. Hadn't a credit to my name until the next payday and I had just been paid as it was." Kirk gave his fellow officer a quick, calculating look. "Could I interest you in my first officer as a substitute?"

"Didn't Vulcans invent game theory?" McGinnis mused. "Think I'll pass on the offer, but thanks anyway."

"If you change your mind--" Kirk suggested as they reached the base commander's office, both instantly assuming the proper military bearing before being admitted.

S'nd'rs'n was not alone. With him was one of the youngest officers Kirk could ever remember seeing -- he looked hardly old enough to be at the Academy. The dull gleam of lieutenant's stripes verified his seniority, but did not explain why he was standing at attention in the commodore's office. What, Kirk wondered, is this

innocent doing here? From the frightened glance he gave them as they entered, this lieutenant would rather be almost anywhere else than in this room facing these three officers.

Kirk felt a twinge of compassion. A real babe in the woods, this one.

"Gentlemen," the commodore said, "this is Lieutenant Dernier. He has something rather interesting to tell you. Stand easy, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir," he replied, stiffening even more. "I'm sorry, sirs," Dernier began earnestly with a myopic glance toward the captains. "I didn't know this would happen. It shouldn't have. There are safeguards," he assured them.

His feet shifted slightly, though he stood at attention as if afraid that somehow the commodore had not meant his order to stand easy. "It was just an exercise. Nothing was supposed to happen. The manuals are very clear on that point."

Mo McGinnis was not the most patient of women and she prodded, though not ungently, "Clear on what, Lieutenant? What did you do that has brought us all here today when I should be somewhere else?"

Again, the nervous glance toward McGinnis and Kirk and after another shuffling of feet, the words exploded in a torrent. "Your ships, sirs, I deleted your ships from Starfleet records. And the crews. And the captains. Everyone. Everything. And all references to them. At least here at Starbase. It wasn't supposed to happen," he told them again. "The manuals said--"

"You did what?" Both Kirk and McGinnis spoke at once.

"I deleted the ships. It wasn't supposed to happen. The safeguards--"

"That's enough, Lieutenant," S'nd'rs'n interrupted. "I'll take it from here. Dismissed."

The lieutenant snapped to attention, cast another desperate glance at the three officers, turned neatly on his heel and hurried from the room.

Kirk waited until he heard the soft swish of the closing door before letting the grin he had been fighting spread across his face. S'nd'rs'n looked mildly amused and McGinnis was openly laughing.

"It was your Terran poet, Shakespeare--"

"That Englishman!" McGinnis mumbled.

"--I think, who said, 'hoist on our own Petard', which I think fits this situation quite well."

"However did he do it?" Kirk asked. "He doesn't look old enough to shave!"

"That young person, Jim, is almost as good as your first officer when it comes to computers. He thought he saw a flaw in the programming and when no one would listen to him, he devised his own subroutine which, when triggered by the flaw no one would believe existed, effectively wiped out the entire patrol fleet in this sector. Needless to say, everyone now acknowledges that the flaw exists. Don't know whether to issue a reprimand or a commendation!"

"But why didn't he come forward once the alert started?" McGinnis asked. "'Would have saved all kinds of trouble.'"

"He did," the commodore replied, "and I decided to let it go on as an exercise."

So you could watch two starship captains sweat out the fate of their ships, Kirk guessed. Out loud he asked, "Just how long have we been ghosts, anyway?"

"Not long. Several months."

"Several months!" both captains responded.

"If the Romulans--" Kirk began.

"If the Klingons--" McGinnis started.

"Gentlemen," S'nd'rs'n snapped. "Only the personnel records were affected. the defense systems were fully operational. The loss of only one ship would have been duly noted, I assure you," he said as Kirk and McGinnis exchanged glances. "We were in no real danger."

"How do we reactivate ourselves?" McGinnis asked. "Life in limbo is hard on the wallet."

"I've assigned Lieutenant Dernier to the project. I'm certain his solution

will be as innovative as it is timely. In the meantime, I've made arrangements for your crews to draw against their pay from the local quartermaster."

"There were several promotions put through during the last several months," Kirk prompted.

The commodore eyed them both, in turn. "Each of you has ensigns up, don't you?" At their nods, he continued. "Well, don't worry about them, gentlemen. I'll see to it personally that they don't get caught up in the new regulations. I'm going to recommend reconsideration of the new regulations, especially as they impact on starship crewman. I trust both of you will support my position?"

Both captains nodded assent.

"In that case—" S'nd'rs'n's tone carried dismissal. McGinnis and Kirk moved to go, but Kirk turned back, recalling the commodore's interest in chess.

"Sir," the Enterprise captain asked, "about that chess problem that was on the bulletin boards — the one where white was to mate in four—"

"Are those still up?" S'nd'rs'n was asked. "I thought I told them -- well, never mind. Been trying to figure it out, Jim?"

"No," Kirk lied, "but my first officer—"

He stopped because S'nd'rs'n was no longer paying attention. Ripples of laughter transformed the base commander from an austere officer to a highly amused individual.

"Let me tell you about that, Jim," he began....

Kirk listened intently, a grin slowing becoming a smile as he listened to the story of the chess problem.

Several hours later, Jim Kirk and Maureen McGinnis separated at the central transporter terminals.

"Let me know when you need the Yorktown to give you a tow, Jamie love."

"You're the last one I'd call, Mo. You'd probably send me a bill for the assist."

"And with interest." Mo McGinnis paused, then put her arms around Kirk, hugging him. "Take care of yourself and that silver lady of yours."

"You do the same, Mo. Bring her home safely."

Captain McGinnis loosened her hold. "Sure I can't interest you in game of cards before we go? I learned this interesting variation of seven card stud, high hand splits with high spade in the hole and—"

"You never give up, do you? No! No! No!" were Kirk's final words as the transporter shimmered him into nothingness.

Later, aboard the Enterprise with McCoy in tow, Kirk found Spock on the bridge, hunched over the library computer. A skeleton staff was on duty -- Uhura at Communications and Lieutenant Hanson at the helm. The navigation console was deserted.

Spock quickly wiped the chess problem from his terminal, but not quickly enough. With a gleam in the eye he could not hide, Kirk approached the science station and leaned against the bridge railing, his arms crossed. McCoy stood next to him, slightly rocking back and forth, his hands behind him and his whole attention one of poorly subdued expectancy. Kirk had briefed him on the way to the bridge and the good doctor was waiting for his chance.

Spock's only comment on the computer mix-up was a quiet "Indeed."

"Well, I for one am glad it was human error," McCoy declared, "or rather human action. Shows that these mechanical marvels are only as good as we let them be."

"Doctor, computers are merely tools that extend man's ability to function, not replace it."

"Since when?" McCoy bristled.

"Gentlemen," Kirk said before Spock could reply. "About that chess problem -- the one where white mates in four?"

"Yes, Captain? Do you wish to see the solution?"

"It can't be done. It was a mistake. Should have been black to mate in four

"Indeed, Captain. White mates in four."

"Huh?" That was from McCoy. He turned to Kirk. "But you said it couldn't be

done, that somebody had switched the knights and--"

"That's what S'nd'rs'n said, Bones."

"If the captain will allow me to demonstrate," Spock suggested, recalling the problem on his terminal. He showed the move that would indeed allow white to mate in four.

Kirk was mentally scratching his head and McCoy was doing it literally.

"I don't know, Spock," the doctor speculated. "That's a rather unorthodox solution. Black would have to be very stupid to make those moves."

"Agreed, Doctor. There was no provision that black had to play brilliantly. And, these moves do solve the problem."

Kirk pushed himself away from the railing, feeling slightly irritated. He should have known better than to try to get the best of his first officer on a chess problem, even one that was "unsolvable" and a "mistake" in the first place. He turned away, then remembered the commodore's promise regarding Chekov's promotion.

The Vulcan listened impassively as Kirk repeated the conversation.

"The commodore is a man of his word," Spock replied. "The ensign's promotion came through twenty minutes ago."

"Already?" Kirk asked. "There's hardly been time--"

"I took the liberty of forwarding a copy of your recommendation to the commodore's office once the situation became clear. By now Lieutenant Chekov is no doubt buying drinks for the crew. If you hurry, Captain, you should be able to join the party. And, of course, you also, Doctor."

"Thanks for remembering me, Spock," McCoy grumbled.

"I don't know why I bother anymore," Kirk muttered under his breath as he turned away.

Spock had already returned to his research and McCoy, after a few seconds glaring at the back of the Vulcan's head, headed for the turbolift.

"Come on, Jim," he said. "Let's go find Chekov and that drink."

"Right, Bones." With a glance in Spock's direction, Kirk added, "Somehow, I don't seem to be needed here -- at least not at the moment," and joined McCoy in the turbolift.

As the doors closed behind them, Spock swiveled around toward the lift, one raised, questioning eyebrow clearly indicating his lack of understanding of humans. Only Uhura saw the slight shrug and the glimmer of what might be interpreted as amusement in the dark eyes, before the first officer turned back to his research, the day's problems neatly solved.



High Spirits

There once was a despondent ensign,
Who demanded his captain's attention --
'Twas the vodka that spoke
When convention he broke
Claiming necessity's a Russian invention!

-- Vera Cacciatore



NO PARKING

BY DEBORAH GOBY

"Jim, will you look at this?" Dr. McCoy was highly indignant.

"Sure, Bones, what is it?" The captain crossed the sickbay to look over McCoy's shoulder at the video screen. "Hmm. I didn't know you were in Chicago then." He grinned at the doctor's outraged expression.

"You know damn well I wasn't," McCoy said with irritation. "We were having a stand-off with the Klingons over that misbegotten mudball of a planet in Sector Six that wasn't even worth the fight."

"Well, the City of Chicago thinks you were. And with an illegally parked flitter yet." Kirk shook his head mournfully, "I thought I taught you better than that, Bones."

McCoy threw his friend an exasperated look. "Jim, I haven't owned a flitter since I was in medical school." He considered the screen for several seconds, then looked up at Kirk. "Do you think it's a joke? It looks like something Sulu might do and he's been looking for a way to get even with me ever since I won all his money playing poker last month."

"It looks pretty official to me. Besides," Kirk grinned again, "that isn't Sulu's style of revenge."

"Don't I know it," the doctor sighed, "my shoulder still aches from the last time."

"I told you you weren't any match for him in martial arts."

"I know, Jim, I know," McCoy answered wryly. "I guess there's no fool like an old fool."

"Well, I was on my way to the bridge," Kirk straightened up from leaning on the desk. "I just stopped in to see how Ensign Woodfield's doing."

"He's doing fine. Should have had that gall bladder out months ago, though." The doctor shrugged his shoulders, "I don't know how he stood it. I guess he was more afraid of the surgery than the pain. Anyway, he'll be back on duty in a week."

"That's good," Kirk gestured towards the screen. "What are you going to do about that?" he asked curiously.

"Oh, I'll send them a message explaining that they made a mistake. That should take care of it."

As the turbolift doors closed behind the captain, Lieutenant Sulu started to get up from the command chair.

"Stay put, Lieutenant, I just came up to see if anything interesting was happening. Anything to report?"

"No, sir," Sulu answered. "Nothing's moving out there. It's been quiet ever

since I came on duty."

Kirk moved over to Lieutenant Uhura's station, "Any messages?"

She turned the chair around to face him, "No, sir, nothing official. I did talk to a Captain Delacroix of the private yacht City of light, and he said that they'd heard that there was some sort of trouble on Daedalus, but his information was a week old and third-hand, besides. He seemed to think that it was just gossip."

"Daedalus, huh?" the captain frowned. "Sulu, are we the closest ship to the planet?"

"Yes, we are," the helmsman nodded. "Not much traffic in this sector. I've already computed a course; we could be there in three days at Warp Six."

"Very good. Uhura, keep your ears open; rumors sometimes have a way of being true."

"Yes, sir," she nodded and turned back to her communications console.

"I'll be in my quarters. Let me know if you hear anything."

The next morning, Kirk was savoring his after-breakfast coffee when Dr. McCoy stomped across the mess hall floor and flung himself into the chair on the other side of the table. "Something wrong, Bones?" he inquired mildly, eyeing the doctor's ferocious frown over the rim of his cup.

"No," McCoy said sourly, "I always act this way when I'm in a good mood." He drummed his fingers on the tabletop.

"Sorry I asked," the captain returned his attention to the coffee.

McCoy sat in silence for a few minutes, his fingertips beating a steady rhythm, then spoke suddenly. "They say that my statement isn't enough. If their computer says I was there, I was there."

"Huh?" Kirk looked puzzled, "They who?"

"The Chicago Traffic Department, that's who," the doctor answered exasperatedly. "C'mon, Jim, you remember, the parking ticket?"

"Oh, that."

"Yeah, that."

They both fell silent, McCoy now fidgeting with his knife, while Kirk stared abstractly at nothing in particular, both hands cupped around his cooling coffee.

"Good morning, Captain, Doctor. May I join you?" Spock stood by the table, holding a tray.

"Good morning, Spock," Kirk looked up, "have a seat."

"Morning," McCoy grunted.

"You seem disturbed, Dr. McCoy," Spock observed dispassionately, setting his tray down and pulling out a chair. "May I inquire as to the cause of your disturbance?"

"You bet your pointed ears I'm disturbed," McCoy almost snarled.

Kirk stood up, "You tell him what's going on, Bones. I'm going to get some more coffee. Mine's cold." He walked over to the dispenser and looked back to see McCoy explaining the situation, heatedly and at length, while Spock calmly ate his breakfast. He returned to the table just in time to hear his first officer say, "The most logical solution, Doctor, is to pay the fine. It would save you time and annoyance."

"Pay the fine!" McCoy's voice rose. Kirk quickly suppressed a grin. "Are you out of your Vulcan mind? Why should I pay a fine for something I didn't do?"

"I believe I said to save yourself time and annoyance," Spock reiterated, reaching for a glass of fruit juice.

"Well, I'm not going to pay it," McCoy said shortly.

"Then what's your next move?" the captain asked. He looked at Spock, "Do you have any ideas?"

"I believe that sending them a copy of the ship's duty roster for that time period, along with a statement from you, Captain, should be sufficient evidence that Dr. McCoy was not, in fact, present in the City of Chicago at that time."

"Yes," McCoy said thoughtfully, "that should settle it."

"Okay, Bones, you pull those records and write the statement; I'll ID it when

you're done." Kirk drained the last few swallows of coffee from his cup and stood up. "I'm going to the bridge. See you later."

As the lift doors opened and the captain stepped out, Uhura looked up, her hand poised over the intercom button, "Captain, I was just about to page you. It seems there is some trouble on Daedalus. We just received a message from Starbase 11."

"Oh?" Kirk took the command chair as Lieutenant Sulu returned to his console. "What kind of message, Uhura?"

"It was a radio squirt, sir. It seems they're having a problem with the atmosphere recirculation unit in Dome Three. The crystals have begun to fail and they don't have a spare filter. We are directed to return to Starbase 11 to pick up a new AR unit and some extra filters for them. I'll put it on screen," her fingers danced over the keyboard and the text of the message appeared on the large screen in front of the navigation and helm consoles.

"Hmm," Kirk read through the message. "Well, it looks like we're going back. Mr. Chekov, chart us a course."

"Yes, sir," Chekov bent over his board, fingers flying over the buttons.

"Mr. Sulu, you may take us out at Warp Three as soon as the course is laid in."

"Warp Three, Captain?" Sulu looked a little disappointed.

"Warp Three, Lieutenant," Kirk smiled wryly. "I know you're bored, but the message clearly states that this is not a life-threatening situation, so there's no need for us to go screaming into the base at top speed."

Sulu sighed, "Yes, sir, Warp Three it is."

"Cheer up, Sulu," Kirk grinned, "I'm sure something interesting will turn up soon enough." He turned his chair to face Uhura, "I wonder why they don't have a spare filter and why we were detailed for this milk run? Any speculations, Lieutenant?"

"Well, Captain," her eyes twinkled, "there was an unofficial P.S. on that squirt. They don't have a spare filter because the technician dropped it and shattered the crystals. We were picked for this 'milk run' because the AR unit is too big to fit in a scoutship and a freighter would take too long. Dome Three is over the dilithium mine and they estimate they can only continue mining for three more days before the atmosphere gets too bad. Besides, the AR unit requires some pre-installation assembly and Commander Miller is counting on Mr. Scott to have it ready when we get back to Daedalus."

"That was a pretty lengthy P.S., Uhura. I take it the communications officer is a friend of yours?" Kirk raised an inquiring eyebrow.

"We were at the Academy together, sir."

"I see. You do know that's against regulations?" he asked casually.

"Why, Captain!" she protested, her eyes widening in spurious innocence, "Of course I do."

"And, of course, you've never..."

"CAP-tain!"

"No, of course you haven't, Lieutenant." He grinned at her, then turned the chair around and got up. "Mr. Sulu, you have the conn." He headed for the turbolift, impishly conscious that he was followed by the amused gaze of the bridge crew and not a few chuckles.

"Sickbay," he told the lift. When the doors opened, he turned and went down the corridor, entering the office to see Dr. McCoy sitting in front of the computer. "You finished with that message, Bones?"

"Just now." McCoy shoved his chair back and gestured at the screen, "Read it through and tell me what you think."

Kirk leaned forward and scanned the text glowing on the screen. "Looks good to me." He typed in his serial number and said, "Computer, message authorized, Captain James T. Kirk."

"Acknowledged," it said.

He stepped back. "There you go, Doctor, officially ID'd. You can send it on

its way."

"Right," McCoy pressed the transmit button. "I certainly hope that settles this can of worms. Bureaucracy!" He made the noun sound like a curse.

"I know what you mean, Bones," Kirk sympathized, "it's the only four-syllable swearword I know." They watched in silence until the screen flashed "Message Transmitted".

"Well, I'd better get to Engineering and let Scotty know that he's going to be setting up that AR unit." The captain started for the door. "Let me know what kind of answer you get."

"Sure, Jim, you'll be the first," McCoy called after him as the door closed.

After supper, Kirk and Spock were waging silent war over a game of chess when Dr. McCoy trudged into the main Rec hall, an expression of settled gloom on his face. He pulled a chair over to their table and sat down heavily, planting his elbows on the table, chin propped on hands. "You aren't going to believe this," he announced in a voice of doom.

"Have you had bad news, Doctor?" Spock asked.

"Yes," McCoy heaved an exasperated sigh. "The Department of Traffic Control of the City of Chicago has informed me that even though I can prove that I wasn't in the city on the date in question, an illegally parked flitter registered to me was, and, therefore, I am still liable for the fine." He paused for effect. "Plus interest and penalties for non-payment."

Kirk completed his move and looked up. "You're kidding," he said incredulously.

"I wish I was," McCoy leaned back in his chair and folded his arms. "Furthermore," he continued, gazing over their heads at the ceiling, "if I do not make payment in full within three days, they will authorize Starbase Security to 'detain' me until an official representative can take me in custody for transport to Chicago to be tried in Traffic Court." He looked at Kirk, then at Spock. "Can you believe that? All that fuss over a little parking ticket." He fumed silently for a minute. "You'd think it was Chicago's primary source of revenue."

The captain laid a hand on his friend's shoulder, "Bones, I think you need a drink." He stood up, "I'll be right back. Spock, do you want anything?"

"No, thank you, Jim, my glass is not empty."

Kirk returned to the table, a glass in each hand, to find McCoy again contemplating the ceiling, while Spock seemed preoccupied with the chess cube. "Here you go, Doctor." He sat down and handed McCoy his glass. They sipped their drinks quietly until Spock looked at both of them and said, "I have an idea, gentlemen."

"You do?" McCoy asked, an expression of hope on his face.

"What is it?" Kirk asked.

Spock leaned his elbows on the table and steepled his fingers. "If Dr. McCoy is determined to fight this matter...."

"I most certainly am," the doctor stated firmly.

"Starfleet has a legal department that is second to none. You could do no better than to consult them. We will be at Starbase 11 in 37.65 hours. I believe that the legal department maintains a large office there." He waited expectantly.

McCoy thumped the tabletop with his fist. "Dammit, Spock, you're right." He raised his glass, grinning widely, "A toast, gentlemen. Here's to fighting fire with fire. And may the best man win." He downed his drink in one swallow.

A day and a half later the Enterprise nudged gently into spacedock. "Docking maneuver completed, Captain," Sulu announced, flipping switches.

"Very good, Mr. Sulu." Kirk touched the intercom button on the arm of his chair. "Mr. Scott."

"Yes, Captain," the engineer replied cheerfully.

"I assume you will want to supervise the loading of the AR unit and filters?"

"Right ye are, sir," Scott answered, "I canna risk the chance of those laddies droppin' somethin' and maybe scratchin' the Enterprise. Besides," he continued, "I want to familiarize mysel' wi' that unit before we leave. I havena worked wi' one

o' that series before."

"Very well, Mr. Scott, you have the conn. I will be beaming down to the base."

"I thought ye might be, Captain. Dr. McCoy's little problem?"

Kirk gave a wry grin. "News certainly travels fast. Yes, Scotty, that and a few other things."

"Well, sir, 'tis a sma' world we have here and the good doctor hasna been exactly silent about the matter. Tell McCoy I wish him luck and I'll take care o' the ship 'til ye get back."

"Will do. Kirk out." He touched the intercom button again and stood. "Uhura, you may announce to the crew that we will be in spacedock until 1900 hours and that all off-duty personnel may have shore leave."

"Yes, sir," she turned to her console and began the announcement as the captain entered the turbolift. "Sickbay," he said as the doors slid shut.

"You ready, Bones?" he called, striding into the sickbay office.

"Half a second," McCoy answered, bent over his desk.

"What are you doing?" Kirk asked, walking around the desk to see the doctor stuffing a small pile of papers into a pouch.

"Getting ready," he answered. He sealed the pouch and straightened up, tucking it under his arm. "You know how lawyers are, Jim. They always like to have all the evidence right in front of them, preferably in a form they can get their hands on."

"Don't I know it," the captain replied with a rueful grin. "And the more insignificant the matter, the more paperwork they want."

"Right." McCoy slapped the pouch with his free hand, "I have here, in this pouch, every communication I've sent or received regarding this fraudulent attempt by the City of Chicago to deprive me of my rights as a citizen." He turned to scan the office, "Just want to make sure I haven't forgotten anything." He pulled the chair out and looked under the desk. "Nope, looks like I got it all." He put the chair back and looked at Kirk, "Well, I guess I'm as ready as I'll ever be."

"Let's go, then." Kirk made a small bow and gestured towards the door, "After you, Don Quixote."

"That's what you think," McCoy retorted.

They entered the transporter room to find both Scott and Spock waiting for them.

"Mr. Scott, what are you doing here?" the captain asked, a note of perplexity in his voice.

"Oh, I just stopped by ta wish the doctor good luck," the engineer replied, grinning. "Now, mind," he turned to McCoy, "if ye end up in the brig, send me word and I'll smuggle ye a bottle wi' a file in it."

"Don't be ridiculous, Scotty," McCoy snorted, "you know it isn't going to go that far."

"Well, if it does, I'll send ye the bottle. See ye later." Scott hurried out the door.

"And why are you here, Spock?" the doctor demanded. "Are you going to wish me luck, too?"

"No, Doctor, I do not believe in the element of 'luck'," Spock answered. "I came to accompany you and the captain. I find the activities of the legal profession, as practiced by Humans, extremely interesting."

"Hmph," McCoy sniffed, "I'm sure you do. Well, c'mon along. The more, the merrier."

"Yes," Kirk put in, "that's a good idea. You might be able to help, Spock."

The three men stepped up on the transporter platform and stationed themselves on the discs. "Energize," the captain told the lieutenant.

"Energizing now," he replied, sliding the control down.

They materialized in a much larger room. "Good afternoon, Lieutenant," Kirk said, stepping off the platform, "can you direct us to the legal department?"

"Certainly, sir," the young man behind the console replied. Take the corridor

to the right, go through the next three intersections, turn left at the fourth one and the 'lift is at the end of the hall. Go down five levels, turn right from the 'lift, and it's the last door on the left. It won't be marked, sir, they just moved into those offices yesterday."

"Thanks, Lieutenant," Kirk started for the door, followed by McCoy and Spock.

"Are you sure you got all that, Captain?"

Kirk paused at the door, "No, I'm not, but undoubtedly my first officer did." He waved a hand at Spock, "Right, Mr. Spock?"

"Affirmative, Captain," he replied.

"Oh, excuse me, sir," the young lieutenant said, blushing, "I hadn't noticed that you were a Vulcan."

"No apologies necessary," Spock answered unperturbed while McCoy smirked in the background.

"You should be careful of boxes and furniture in the corridors," the youthful officer warned them, eager to atone for his previous faux pas. "A lot of departments have been moving around lately to make room for a new science division."

"Thank you for the warning, Lieutenant," Kirk answered with a smile, "we'll watch where we step."

"How could he not notice those ears?" the doctor demanded as they started down the hall.

"No doubt the young man has a sophisticated background and is used to seeing people of non-human appearance," Spock replied. "Possibly his father is in the Diplomatic Corps." He waited, one eyebrow lifted for McCoy's reaction.

He got it. "Why you..." the doctor sputtered, stopping in his tracks. "Are you making comparisons?"

"I assure you, I am not. It just occurred to me as a possible explanation." Spock projected a positive aura of innocence.

"Forget it, Bones," the captain broke in before McCoy could voice a retort, "Spock got you that time."

They arrived at their destination to find themselves facing a blank door, just as the transporter officer had said. Kirk opened the door and they walked in to see a woman in civilian dress seated at a computer terminal.

"Excuse me, miss..." the captain began.

"No," she said abruptly, not looking around, "this is not the legal department nor is this the registration desk and you can't get to either place from here."

"I beg your pardon," Kirk put on his best Captain's voice. "What did you say?"

"Oh, great Sirius save me," she groaned. She turned, brushing a lock of red hair out of her eyes. "I knew I was going to get in trouble sooner or later, but it's Starfleet's fault. They should have made better arrangements. I told them I needed peace and no interruptions if they wanted this study any time soon." She stood up. "I am sorry, gentlemen, but you are tenth, eleventh, and twelfth persons to walk in here in the last hour and I am under a deadline." She spread her hands helplessly and shrugged her shoulders, smiling apologetically, "What else can I say?"

Kirk smiled back, "I'm sorry, too, Miss..."

"Dr. Arlene Ryan, special consultant attached to the new Life Science Division." She extended her hand.

"Captain James Kirk of the Enterprise," he said, taking her hand. "My science officer, Mr. Spock, and the ship's medical officer, Leonard McCoy. Have you tried locking the door?" he asked as McCoy stepped forward to shake her hand.

"Yes -- that just means that whoever's there knocks until I get up and open it." She returned Spock's Vulcan salute. "We just moved in and no one's been here yet to put up the proper sign. This was the legal department until two days ago and I can't convince the dummy at the transporter station that Legal has moved. He says that until he hears it from the brass, Legal is still here."

"I know what you mean," Kirk smiled again. "Commander Miller is a friend of

mine; I'll see what I can do about getting your problem fixed. In the meantime, we're still looking for the legal department. Do you know where they moved?"

"Yes, I do," she smiled ruefully. "I made a point of finding out when it became obvious that I was going to have to man an information desk as well as my own. Two levels up and go left, instead of right, when you get off the 'lift.'"

"Thank you for the directions, Dr. Ryan. I hope you don't have too many more interruptions."

"I hope so, too, Captain. And thanks for your help."

Following Dr. Ryan's directions, they retraced their steps, arriving at the legal department to find that door properly marked. They entered and, after a few minutes wait, were directed to a small office.

"Can I help you, gentlemen?" The man seated at the desk was very young and McCoy looked at him with misgiving.

"If you're a lawyer, you can," he said dubiously.

"Yes, I am an attorney," the young man sighed. "I know I look too young; I hear it all the time."

"I'm Dr. Leonard McCoy, this is Captain James Kirk, and Science Officer Spock."

"Jerry Menendez." They shook hands, then, at Mendendez' invitation, they all found chairs.

"Well, what can I do for you?"

McCoy leaned forward, "I have this little problem...." He explained the situation in detail, taking the various papers out of the pouch and laying them on the desk. When he was done, he leaned back in his chair and looked at the lawyer hopefully, "Well?"

Menendez just sat there, then he picked up the last message McCoy had received and read it through. He looked at the doctor over the top of the paper. "The best advice I can give you is to pay the entire sum they are demanding immediately. If it's not already too late."

"What!" McCoy demanded incredulously. "Do you mean there's nothing you can do?"

"That's just about the size of it," Menendez dropped the paper on the desk and shrugged. "I could try to fight it, but it's probably too late for that. Even if it isn't, it means months of legal wrangling."

Before McCoy could explode again, Spock interrupted, "Do you know this for a fact, Mr. Menendez?"

"Yes, unfortunately, I do," the lawyer answered sadly. "Yours is about the fiftieth case I've seen. I tried to fight the first six or seven but they all came down to the matter of the registration number on the vehicle and Chicago absolutely maintains that their computer cannot make a mistake. I believe that the city is being sued in Superior Court right now, but until that case is settled, they won't change their stand. It might damage their case now in litigation."

"I see," Spock said thoughtfully. "Perhaps you can tell us how this situation came about?"

"Oh, sure. Any attorney in Federation space could. Chicago has always had a problem with illegal parking and unpaid fines. The city also needs funds to construct a new port facility to generate income. Their financial status has been pretty shaky for several years. So, they hired an outside consulting firm to collect the outstanding funds, hoping to kill two birds with one stone -- improve their current financial status and pay for the port. The problem began when the Traffic Department transmitted information to the consulting firm. Evidently there was a glitch in the transfer and hundreds of thousands of the registration numbers were scrambled. As a result, hundreds of thousands of these incorrect notices are going out. It's been going on for about eight months now."

"What did you mean about it might be too late?" McCoy asked.

"One of the consulting firm's changes in Chicago's policy was to assign a municipal treasury agent to each starbase." Menendez grimaced. "The one we got is a genuine little creep. Name's Johnson. As soon as he hears that the Enterprise

is here, he's going to come looking for you. You'll save yourself a lot of trouble and an embarrassing scene if you use the terminal in the outer office to pay the fine right now and get a receipt. I really feel that's the best advice I can give you," Menendez said earnestly.

"And what if I don't?" McCoy asked truculently.

"Now, Bones..." Jim put in warningly.

"You didn't hear us discuss this, Jim," McCoy looked directly at his captain, "did you?"

Kirk threw up his hands in surrender, "All right, it's on your head."

"Well, speaking unofficially, if I were you, I'd make myself scarce. Don't go back to the ship until just before it leaves and don't be anywhere on the base where you might be expected to be." Menendez folded his hands on the desktop. "I suggest a very noisy and very crowded bar. By the way," he said pointedly, "I didn't tell you that."

After gathering up McCoy's papers and bidding the young lawyer goodbye, the three men started back down the corridor. "May I enquire what you are going to do, Doctor?" Spock asked.

McCoy looked at him thoughtfully, "I think I'll ask Dr. Ryan to have dinner with me, but I don't think I'll tell either of you where. What you don't know can't get me in trouble."

"Or us," Kirk put in. "Just be sure you're on board the Enterprise at 1900 hours."

"Oh, don't worry, I'll be there," McCoy assured him as they reached the turbolift. He waved them ahead of him, "You two go on. I'm going to go fade into the woodwork somewhere."

Kirk and Spock stepped into the 'lift. "I think I'll pay a visit to Bob Miller. I haven't seen him in a while. Would you care to come along, Spock?"

"I believe not, Captain. I have heard that the new Life Science Laboratory here was to be overseen by a former teacher of mine. If Starhn is indeed in charge, I am sure he would grant me the favor of a tour."

Kirk touched a button on the control panel. "In that case, you'll be getting off a few levels before I do."

A pretty blonde lieutenant announced Kirk and he walked into Commander Miller's office to an exuberant greeting. "Jim!" the stocky dark-haired man strode forward to pump his hand. "How the hell are you? I haven't seen you since that party at Rosalie's."

"I'm fine, and I should think you'd want to forget that particular party. You almost got us both thrown in the brig," Kirk couldn't help grinning at his old friend.

"Forget it! Are you kidding? That was the best party I'd been to in a while." Miller went back to his chair and gestured Kirk to the one on the opposite side of the large desk. "Besides," he continued, "I got us out of it." He opened a drawer and brought up a bottle and two glasses.

"I'll say you did. That was the slickest snow job I'd ever seen. And a great story. I've used it a few times myself since then." Jim accepted a glass and sipped the purple liquid appreciatively. "Antarean selaara. How do you manage to get this stuff here?"

Miller smirked, "A base commander can make the right contacts if he knows his way around. And nobody knows his way around better than I do."

Kirk laughed, "I'll say. Do you remember..." The two men reminisced and laughed for the next hour until the commander looked at the ornate clock on his desk and set his glass down with a click. "Where does the time go? I'm sorry, Jim, but I've got to get up to the reception area. There's a shipload of scientists due in ten minutes that I've got to meet and greet. Pretty prominent people, attached to that new Life Science lab." He stood up. "I'll tell you what. There've been quite a few changes since you were last here. I'll get Lieutenant O'Hara to give you a tour, then we can have dinner at the Officer's Club."

"Sounds fine to me." Kirk set his glass down and stood up. "Before you run

off, though I'd like to ask a favor." Briefly he explained Dr. Ryan's problem and received Miller's promise to set the matter right. Both men walked to the door, where the base commander introduced the blonde as Lieutenant O'Hara.

Kirk spent an entertaining afternoon with the lieutenant, who was as intelligent as she was attractive. Later, at dinner, he thanked Miller for his choice of guide. "She's really something, isn't she," the commander said, spearing a bite of steak.

"She certainly is," Kirk replied. He looked at his friend, eyes twinkling. "If we were going to be here longer, I'd be having dinner with her rather than you."

Miller laughed, "I don't blame you. But dinner would be about all you could expect. Lieutenant O'Hara is one ambitious woman. She's after a career in Administration and will be very good at it."

"I take it you're pushing her on as fast as possible?" Kirk asked, surveying his baked potato.

"Yes, I am. I hate to lose her, but I like to see qualified people move up. She's on the next promotion list and I expect it'll be rubber-stamped."

"I know what you mean," Kirk replied, "I've had to let some good people go, too." He cut into the potato and reached for the butter. "What happened to that Ensign Schultz who was following you around the last time I was here?"

"Him?" Miller laughed, "You wouldn't believe it..." The two men lingered over their dinner, talking about the people they had worked with in the past and the things they had done. They were relaxing in the bar with after-dinner brandy when Captain Kirk's communicator beeped at him. "Excuse me, Bob," Kirk reached for the communicator and flipped it open. "Kirk here," he answered.

"Captain, we've had a distress call from Daedalus," Uhura's voice sounded ominously loud against the subdued hum of conversation in the bar. "It seems that some children got into Dome Three without protective suits and collapsed. They were there quite a while before someone found them. One little girl has already died and the doctor has the others on life support, but they need to be hospitalized as soon as possible."

"Has Scotty got the AR unit aboard?" the captain asked.

"Yes, sir, it's aboard and, as far as he's concerned, we can leave any time."

"Very well, put out the recall for all personnel on shore leave."

"I've already done that, sir, and people are beaming aboard now."

"Good work, Uhura. I'll beam up shortly and we'll leave in half an hour. Kirk out." He closed the communicator and replaced it on his belt. "Bob, sorry to run out on you, but I've got to go." He put out his hand, "It was great seeing you again."

Miller ignored the outstretched hand, "I'll walk with you to the transporter. It's on the way back to my office and I was going back there after dinner. C'mon, let's go."

They ducked out the Officer's Club door and were striding rapidly down the corridor, when a woman's voice called from behind them, "Captain! Captain Kirk! Please wait. I must talk to you."

Kirk looked over his shoulder to see Dr. Ryan running after them. He stopped as she caught up to them, out of breath and red hair flying. He took her arm to steady her and asked with concern, "Dr. Ryan, what's wrong?"

She clung to his arm gratefully, brushing her hair out of her eyes. "It's Leonard," she said, taking a deep breath. "Some man appeared with two security officers and arrested him while we were having dinner. He told me where to find you and to let you know what happened. What is going on?"

"Dammit to hell!" Kirk swore fervently. "Of all times for McCoy to be on one of his crusades!"

Miller looked confused, "Is Dr. McCoy in some kind of trouble?" he asked. "You didn't mention anything about it."

"I don't know whether he is or he isn't." Kirk wiped a hand across his forehead as if to brush away his confusion. "Maybe you can tell me. It all

started when he got this parking ticket from--"

"Chicago," Commander Miller and Dr. Ryan spoke in unison. "C'mon," Miller continued, "I know where they're holding him." He started down the corridor. "Let's go rescue him. I've been looking for a chance to spike that bureaucratic busybody's guns, and now's the time."

The two security guards posted outside the door stepped aside and saluted as Miller walked up to them, followed by Kirk and Arlene Ryan. "You two are dismissed," the commander said, returning their salutes, "I'll take care of this matter now."

"Yes, sir, thank you, sir," the older one said, then they both turned and walked away. Loud voices could be heard through the door. Miller shoved it open and strode in, followed by the other two. McCoy and his captor were arguing too vociferously to notice their entrance. "MIS-ter Johnson!" Miller bellowed in his best parade ground voice, "just what is going on here?"

Johnson spun around to look at the commander, his eyes glaring. "Commander Miller, you cannot interfere in a civil matter. This man is to be remanded to the civil authorities of the City of Chicago and tried there for violation of City Code 314A, Section 24."

"Not this time, Johnson," Miller's smile was predatory. "This man is a doctor--"

"I am aware of that," the agent said stiffly.

"And has been summoned to a medical emergency--"

"What emergency?" McCoy interrupted. "He's got my communicator locked in his briefcase and wouldn't let me answer it."

"--on the planet Daedalus and that takes precedence over any civil matter whatsoever." Miller looked triumphant.

"Not unless he pays the fine and penalties and interest in full," Johnson said querulously.

"I've already told you I will not pay a fine for something I didn't do," McCoy snapped. He turned to Kirk, "What happened on Daedalus?"

"You'd better check your regulations," Miller told the agent. "If you obstruct a Starfleet medical officer in the performance of his duties, you are laying yourself open to charges. There's a communicator on the desk behind you. Why don't you use it?" He turned to Kirk, who was filling McCoy in on the situation on the planet, "Call your ship and have them beam you up now," he said softly. "I'll handle this nincompoop."

"Thanks, Bob," the captain took his communicator off his belt and flipped it open, as Johnson turned towards the desk.

When the characteristic whine of the transporter filled the room, the treasury agent whirled around, dropping the communicator. "Stop!" he shouted. "You can't do this!"

"Too late," Miller said as the two shimmering columns faded from sight.

When the two men materialized in the ship's transporter room, Kirk shot a dark look at McCoy. "Bones, I'll talk to you later." He stepped off the platform and started for the door. "Lieutenant Kyle," he called over his shoulder, "let Uhura know that I'm aboard and tell her that I want a head count as soon as I'm on the bridge." He went out the door at a fast trot.

Kirk fumed as he entered the turbolift. Damn McCoy, he thought, for getting me involved in this. I'll have his hide. The doors opened and he stepped out on the bridge. "Uhura, is everybody on board?" he asked as he headed for the command chair.

"Yes, sir," she replied, "you and Dr. McCoy were the last."

"That figures," he muttered.

"What? Did you say something, Captain?" Uhura frowned in confusion.

"Nothing important, Lieutenant," he answered hastily. He turned the chair toward the navigator's station, "Mr. Chekov, have you computed the course?"

"Yes, sir, laid in and waiting."

"Very good, Ensign. Mr. Sulu, you may take us out. One quarter impulse

power. Warp Seven as soon as we clear the base."

"Yes, sir," Sulu keyed his board. "One quarter impulse power coming up now."

By the time the Enterprise was under way and Kirk had taken care of all the details involved, he had calmed down considerably. He had even admitted to himself that he probably would have reacted in the same way if he were in McCoy's place. And, being a just man, he couldn't berate McCoy for doing what he would have done. After all, the situation did have its funny side.

"Well, Doctor?" Kirk asked later in his cabin, "just what do you have to say for yourself?"

"I almost had him talked out of taking me in," McCoy said. "Just a few more minutes and I'd have walked away scot-free."

"Really?" the captain asked skeptically. "It sounded to me like the two of you were shouting."

"Well, we were," McCoy answered, "but it was a lot quieter than it had been a couple of minutes before. I thought that was a good sign."

Kirk sighed. "Bones, why don't you just pay the fine and get it over with? It would be a lot simpler and easier on me, too."

"I don't owe it, that's why," McCoy answered stubbornly.

"All right. I'm not going to order you to pay it, not yet. But you get the situation taken care of when we get back. And that is an order."

"Aye, aye, Captain," McCoy grinned at him, "I'll get it taken care of."

"And, Bones?"

"Yes, Jim?"

"Keep me out of it."

♦♦♦

The trip to Daedalus was uneventful. Once there, the AR unit and filters were beamed down to the planet's surface, with Mr. Scott in attendance. He would stay behind to see the unit properly installed, while the Enterprise made the trip back to the Starbase with their four small patients. They would pick him up on the return flight to their current mission.

McCoy was very busy on the return trip to the base. All four children were on heart-lung by-pass units. The local doctor had confirmed what he had suspected: their lungs were virtually destroyed by the prolonged exposure to the atmosphere of Daedalus, which contained very corrosive trace elements. Dr. Zaffiri had neither the equipment nor the organ banks to perform the transplant surgery that would be required.

On the last night before the ship put in at the starbase, McCoy walked softly through the dimly lit sickbay, checking the vital signs monitors above each small form. He stopped by one little girl and reached to brush her dark hair back from her face. He stood there, his hand resting on her head. She looked so much like Joanna had at that age. Tears filled his eyes. A sound at the door made him turn around, brushing at the teardrops beginning to slide down his cheeks.

"How are they, Bones?" the captain was silhouetted by the light from the outer office.

"They're doing as well as can be expected. I'll be a lot happier when they're all in the hospital, though." McCoy glanced at the chronometer on the wall. "What are you doing up, Jim? It's four o'clock in the morning."

"I came to bully you into getting some sleep. You've hardly slept at all since we left Daedalus and, if I know you, you're planning to assist at the surgery tomorrow. You can't do that half-dead from fatigue or on stim shots." Kirk smiled gently at his friend. "She's not Joanna, you know. And you told me that they all would be as good as new after the surgery. Dr. M'Benga's right here. Let him watch over them and you get some sleep."

"You're right, Jim. I do need some rest." He looked down at the small girl. "She does look like Joanna, doesn't she?" He bent to drop a gentle kiss on the unconscious child's forehead, then straightened up and walked toward the door. "I guess I will go to bed."

"That's good," Kirk put an arm around his friend's shoulders. "I'll leave

orders that you're not to be disturbed until just before we dock."

Despite the captain's do-not-disturb order, McCoy was out of bed well before the Enterprise put in at Starbase 11, checking on his patients and performing as much of the pre-surgical prep as he could. The ship had barely docked when he and Nurse Chapel ferried the first child directly down to the hospital transporter. M'Benga and another nurse followed with the second child, while McCoy and Chapel went back for the third. By the time the first three were in pre-Op, M'Benga and the second nurse were down with the last little boy and McCoy hurried them into the prep room. He stayed just long enough to assure himself that the hospital staff was taking the very best care of his charges, then left the room and trotted down the hall to the lounge where their anxious parents were waiting. He talked with them for several minutes, answering their questions and assuring them that their precious children would be healthy and whole again. After one final word of comfort, he left the lounge and walked toward the scrub room.

There was a commotion behind him. He turned to see Johnson hurrying down the corridor, followed by a security man. "Stop that man! He's under arrest!" the treasury agent shouted, breaking into a clumsy run.

"Not now, Johnson!" McCoy yelled. "I'm due in surgery immediately." He sprinted for the scrub room door. As it slid open in front of him, he glanced back to see two nurses and a burly orderly moving to intercept the running man.

"Something wrong, Doctor?" one of the surgeons in the room asked.

"Nothing important," McCoy replied, extending his hands and arms under the sonic sterilizer, "just a little mix-up over a parking ticket."

"Oh, you too, huh?" the doctor said sympathetically. They walked into the surgery, their hands held out in front of them. "You might as well give up and pay the fine," the other man said, plunging his arms into the sterile gown the nurse held for him. "I did. It just wasn't worth the trouble. They'll get you in the end."

Five hours later, McCoy left the surgical suite tired, but pleased. All four surgeries had gone perfectly and all the children were recovering nicely in Post-Op. He smiled happily as he took off his surgical gown in the scrub room. "What's your prognosis, Harding?" he asked as the other surgeon walked in.

"I think it went well," Harding answered, dropping his gown in the disposal chute. "They should all recover completely. Of course, that's mostly due to the excellent care they had before the surgery." He put out a hand. "I'm glad to make your acquaintance, Doctor. You're a credit to the profession."

"The credit's not all mine," McCoy said modestly, taking his hand in a firm grasp. "It's mostly due to Dr. Zaffiri for the immediate post-trauma treatment he administered. I couldn't have done a thing for them if he hadn't made the right decision. By the way, thanks for the lesson in transplant technique. You showed me a couple of things I hadn't seen before. Would you go over that Westerberger Maneuver again? I want to be sure I've got it down."

"Sure thing," Harding replied, crossing his arms and leaning against the wall. The two men talked medical matters for a while, then McCoy glanced at the wall chronometer, stretching and rubbing the back of his neck. "I guess I'd better head back to the Enterprise," he said, yawning. "My captain's probably looking for me and I could use some sleep. I didn't get much on the way here."

"I know what you mean," Harding agreed, "I never sleep well before major surgery either."

"It was nice meeting you," McCoy said as they shook hands in parting. "I hope we can work together again some time."

"Same here."

McCoy started for the door, then stopped short and turned around. "Uh, do me a favor? Stick your head out and see if that creep Johnson's still here."

Harding laughed and went out the door first. "You're in luck," he said, "the coast is clear."

McCoy left the surgical department and headed for the transporter station. Halfway there, he met Kirk coming down the corridor toward him. "Jim," he said in

a surprised voice, "what are you doing here?"

"Looking for you," the captain answered. One quick look at McCoy expression had told him that the operations were successful, but he asked anyway. "How'd it go, Bones?"

"Just fine," the doctor replied with a small smile of contentment. "All the kids came through the surgery with flying colors and should do well post-operatively. Dr. Harding is one fine surgeon and I have no qualms about leaving them in his care."

"I'm glad to hear it," Kirk said sincerely, as they continued down the corridor. "I'd hate to tell you what I've got to tell you if things hadn't gone well."

"Oh? What is it?" McCoy asked with mild curiosity.

"You're not going to like it," Kirk warned him.

"Well, tell me and get it over with. I'm too tired to be very violent."

"It's about that parking ticket."

"What now," McCoy groaned.

"I had a message from the Paymaster's office while you were in surgery. It seems that he has received a notice from the legal department of the City of Chicago that you will be summoned to appear in court." Kirk kept his eyes carefully straight ahead.

After a few seconds of silence, McCoy expressed his sentiments with one well-chosen, extremely pornographic obscenity. A passing ensign dropped the charts she was carrying and stared after him in amazement.

Kirk smothered a chuckle. "Bones, you know that isn't going to solve anything. You're going to have to pay it," he continued in a serious tone. "The Paymaster will buck it upstairs to Administration and they'll order you to pay the fine. You know what Starfleet's policy is about civilian legal disputes. Especially such a minor matter as this."

"Yes, I know," McCoy said sarcastically, "unfair, that's what it is."

"Will you pay it?"

"Hell, I don't know. Ask me again when I'm not so tired."

They walked on in silence, passing an observation deck. Kirk glanced casually through the door to see the Enterprise framed in its windows, floating serenely. As they came in sight of the transporter station, he said quietly, "I could make that an order, Doctor."

Just then, a door on their right opened and Johnson stepped out, a nasty smile on his face. "Dr. McCoy," he said smugly, "I believe we have a small matter to take care of."

"Where's Security, Johnson?" the doctor asked cuttingly. "Or did you decide you could handle me all by yourself?"

"That's none of your business," the treasury agent answered sharply.

"Oh, I see," McCoy's smile was equally nasty, "there just weren't any men available, were there? I expect that Commander Miller had them all doing something else."

Johnson turned red. "Sarcasm isn't going to help you at all," he said thinly. "My chief keeps me informed of everything that goes on with the cases I've been assigned and I know that Starfleet will order you to pay the fine. Would you care to follow me to my office now?"

McCoy signed, "All right. I guess I'm out-gunned. Not by you, however. Lead on, bloodsucker." Kirk winced at his choice of words. The agent gave him a look that promised retribution for the insult and started back down the corridor. He led them to a small shabby office, furnished only with a battered desk and one wobbly chair.

"The base commander doesn't like you at all, does he?" McCoy observed, looking around the room.

"This is only temporary," Johnson snapped. "If you would please be quiet while I compute the total fine." He opened a drawer and pulled out a dog-eared file and an old-fashioned calculator. While he was occupied, Kirk gave the doctor

an elbow in the ribs and said, out of the corner of his mouth, "For God's sake, Bones. Keep your mouth shut."

Johnson hunched over the calculator, punching buttons, then looked up at McCoy and announced with relish, "The total comes to three thousand, five hundred sixty-four point thirteen credits."

"What!" McCoy yelped. "That can't be right," he objected heatedly. "That's half again as much as the last notice said it was."

"There's no mistake." Johnson smirked. "Of course, I do have a certain amount of latitude in figuring the interest charges."

"Why, you little..." the doctor started around the desk.

"Bones, stop it." Kirk grabbed his arm while the other man shrank back in his chair. "Look, I don't want to listen to you two argue. What's the difference? I'll pay it."

"You will not, Jim," McCoy was adamant.

"In any case, you can't," Johnson said huffily. "I can't accept funds drawn on any account other than Dr. McCoy's."

Kirk swung the doctor around to face him and said menacingly, "Pay it, McCoy, or, so help me, I'll confine you to quarters for the rest of your life."

"All right, all right," McCoy answered petulantly. He shook off the captain's restraining hand and turned back to the agent. "Let's get it over with. What do I do?"

Johnson pulled a multi-copy form out of the drawer and slapped it on the desktop. "I'll make out this voucher and you sign it with your name, rank, and serial number. In quadruplicate, if you please. I'll also need the name of your credit institution and the account number. That goes on this form here," he pulled another multi-copy set out of a different drawer, "in triplicate. Then three forms of identification and your thumbprint."

"What?" McCoy asked sarcastically, "You mean you don't want my mother's maiden name and a history of my sex life?"

"No," the agent said with asperity, "I do not."

The doctor completed the transaction in silence, then stood waiting while Johnson shuffled the papers in with a stack of similar forms. He carefully squared the pile of papers, then moved it to a corner of the desk, and squared it again. He picked up the little calculator and replaced it in the drawer. He looked up at McCoy, "Well," he said sharply, "what are you waiting for?"

"Aren't you going to thank me for my cooperation?" the doctor demanded.

"Get out of my office," Johnson said through gritted teeth.

"C'mon, Bones, let's go," Kirk urged him.

"Just a minute, Jim." McCoy placed his hands on the desk and leaned over the agent threateningly. "Let me tell you one thing, you insufferable little twerp. You'd better hope you never need medical care from me. I can guarantee you a very long and extremely painful recovery."

Kirk rolled his eyes in disbelief and irritation, then grabbed McCoy's arm and yanked him out the door, while Johnson stared after them in murderous silence.

The two men walked rapidly down the corridor for a minute, then the captain exploded. "McCoy, you brainless idiot! If you ever drag me into anything like this again, I'll string you up, I swear it."

"Me drag you into it? You're crazy! I never asked you to get involved," the doctor retorted irately.

"Oh? And who sent Dr. Ryan running to find me when Johnson nabbed you the first time? Your guardian angel?" Kirk asked sardonically.

"Keptin!" a voice called from behind them. They both looked back to see Chekov hurrying up.

"Not now, Ensign," Kirk said sharply.

"I did not tell Arlene to send you after me." McCoy said heatedly. "I just wanted you to know where I was."

"Do you expect me to believe that?" the captain demanded.

"Yes, I do. And, furthermore, if you had stayed out of it, I could have

talked Johnson into letting me go!"

Chekov interrupted, "But, Keptin..."

"Not now, Chekov!" Kirk was adamant. "It didn't sound to me like you were winning that round," he continued acidly. "You'd have been in the brig in another two minutes."

"I would not!" McCoy objected violently.

"And what's more, you made threats against a government official! Are you out of your mind?" Kirk hurried past the observation deck, the other two hard on his heels.

"Keptin, please..." Chekov tried again.

"Ensign, I said NOT NOW!"

"The little twerp had it coming!" McCoy exclaimed hotly.

"That doesn't matter, you don't..." Kirk stopped suddenly, a confused expression on his face. Chekov tripped over his feet trying to stop and fell against McCoy. "What the..." Kirk stepped around them and ran back to the observation deck. "My ship!" He exclaimed. "Where's the Enterprise? It was here a few minutes ago?"

"What?" McCoy walked up behind him.

"When we came past this deck before, I could see the ship through the window. It's not there now!" Kirk explained impatiently.

An evil genius pricked McCoy and he smiled sweetly and said, "Maybe that was a no parking zone, Jim, and the police had it towed."

"What are you talking about?" Chekov looked puzzled.

Kirk frowned heavily at the doctor. "If that's a joke, McCoy, I'm not laughing."

"Maybe you got a parking ticket," the doctor needled him. "I wonder how much the fine will be? Let's see," he mused, warming to the idea, "if my fine was three thousand credits for a flitter, and you think how much bigger a starship is... Why, it wouldn't surprise me if the fine was as high as sixty thousand credits." He looked blandly at the captain, "Or higher."

"Can they do that?" Chekov asked, eyes round with astonishment.

"Bones, don't push it," Kirk said warningly. He looked at Chekov, "No, Ensign, starships don't get parking tickets. Don't believe a word McCoy says."

"Yes, sair," Chekov said with relief, "I am glad to know that. Sixty thousand credits is a lot of money."

"So is three thousand, to some people," McCoy said dryly.

"It wouldn't have been three thousand if you hadn't been so stubborn, Bones." Kirk grinned, "Didn't you ever hear that it doesn't pay to fight City Hall?" He turned back to the window, "I know I saw the Enterprise through that window not thirty minutes ago," he said in a perplexed voice.

"Ah, yes, Keptin, excuse me," Chekov recalled the reason he had been looking for Kirk in the first place. "The ship has been moved to a different berth. That is what I was trying to tell you."

"I see," the captain said. "I wonder why Uhura didn't call me on my communicator?"

"She couldn't, sair," Chekov explained. "The main circuit board shorted out when one of the engineering ensigns dropped a power cable across it and the feedback took out the diagnostic relays, too. So the ship has been moved to a repair bay."

"Oh, boy," Kirk said forebodingly, "I'd better beam aboard and see how bad the damage is." He started for the transporter room. "C'mon, you two, let's go."

Chekov didn't move. "Uh, Keptin, that is not all."

Kirk turned and looked at him. "I can tell from your face that it's not good news." He sighed. "All, right, Chekov, what is it?"

"Vell, the ship had to be towed to Maintenance because we lost the helm controls and there was a little problem."

"What kind of problem, Ensign?"

"There was a little collision."

"A collision," Kirk repeated hollowly while hair-raising visions paraded through his mind. "A collision with what?" he asked. Behind him, the corners of McCoy's mouth twitched.

"With a private mining vessel," Chekov answered.

"How much damage?" Kirk asked in a resigned voice.

"Oh, very little to the Enterprise, sir," the ensign hastened to assure him.

"But quite a bit to the other ship. The captain is very unhappy."

McCoy grinned.

"I'm sure he is," Kirk replied.

"He has called Base Security and is threatening to file charges against you, Keptin."

"But I wasn't even aboard," Kirk protested.

McCoy began to chuckle.

"What are you laughing about, Bones?" the captain demanded, turning around.

"Isn't that what you call a moving violation, Jim? It just occurred to me that a moving violation carries a larger fine than a parking ticket." McCoy shrugged his shoulders. "That's all, Captain, nothing important." He started for the transporter station, "I think we should get back to the Enterprise and wait for the authorities, don't you?"

Brandy

Sometimes
After a long day
Brandy is all that's left.
My compassion
Sympathy and endurance
Need a little lift.
So I prescribe brandy
And friends.
It restores me
And them.
We survive together.

— Patt

FATE

Your dice did roll
And come up ones
No sevens
No lucky runs
Chance passed you by
Your turn is done
Today, you die

— Patt

knowing is knowing

by bonita kate

CHAPTER I

A gangly young crewman was waiting in the transporter room to show Tamas to her quarters. He looked about sixteen, with the long neck and coat-hanger shoulders of a boy who hasn't achieved his full growth yet. He had an invitation to deliver, prefaced with much clearing of the throat. "Captain's compliments, Miss Renarde, and would you join him and a couple of his officers for supper at 0730?"

"Gladly, Yeoman, but can you arrange for someone to come show me the way? I can see," she said as they entered a turbolift, "that it would be all too easy to lose oneself here."

The yeoman returned her smile as they proceeded down a corridor and around a curve. He set her bag down inside a door that slid open as they approached. "The lock is up here, ma'am; just press this panel. The door opens to 'come.' Bath through there; clothing programs in there, too. Your own clothes can also be processed; you'll see the directions."

"Thank you very much, Yeoman. This all looks startlingly comfortable."

"And I'll speak to the captain about a guide."

"Thank you." The yeoman left, before Tamas thought that she should have asked his name. After all, she'd be on the ship three or four weeks; it behooved her to be reasonably friendly. She wondered if she was totally out of the habit of being friendly. Or perhaps it was just lack of sleep.

She looked around the small room, glancing from the tan walls to the tan floor to the tan desk and computer terminal. Yawning, she set an 0700 wakeup, stripped to her underclothes, and collapsed on the tan bunk. A fine-sounding name - Enterprise, she thought, as she drifted off. I wonder if they try to live up to it.

She woke at 0658 and canceled the wakeup. After a leisurely time in the cabin's superb bathing facilities, she put on a long blue gown, hoping it would do for "dress uniform." Her hair she pinned back and let fall loose. It was dark and plain; since Peter's death she had not cared enough to have it iridesced, or even cut. Useful now -- when traveling you could never be sure that you'd be able to keep up a complicated hairstyle. She smoothed the bunk, and heard a buzzer -- the door signal. "Come."

The door slid open, and she was looking straight into a pair of quizzical hazel eyes, reflecting appreciation. The man behind them was in a dress uniform, and Tamas' eyes widened slightly as she saw his insignia. "I understand you

requested a guide to dinner," he said in a pleasant, slightly teasing voice with a strong, homelike Terran accent.

"Why yes, thank you, Captain," she answered, stepping through the doorway and putting her hand on his arm. "I find your ship a bit bewildering, I must confess. I've seen holos, of course, but they don't give any idea of the size and complexity. From outside, she looks quite simple." The captain opened his mouth. "And altogether lovely, of course, Captain," Tamas said, smiling gently.

The captain gave a half-laugh. "She certainly seems so to me, anyway. Beautiful and reliable. She's never let me down, and I don't ever want to give her reason to. By the way, my name is Kirk, James Kirk."

"Tamas Renarde, Captain Kirk." She smothered a yawn. "Excuse me please, Captain, I didn't get much sleep last night, getting up to wait for vector match and transport. This supper will be more of a breakfast for me."

"We don't worry too much about what to call meals, with everyone on different shifts. The menu will be sufficiently varied, I trust. One thing I hope you don't mind is that this meal will be all vegetarian." He grinned suddenly and disarmingly. "My first officer is a Vulcan, and I never offend his sensibilities unnecessarily. They don't eat meat, you know," he added in response to her questioning glance.

"I know they don't eat meat, but I thought they didn't have any sensibilities, either," she said frankly, as they stopped in front of a door. It opened before Kirk could give vent to more than an annoyed glance, which he smoothed away as he gestured towards the two other men in the room.

"Miss Renarde, I would like you to meet my first officer and science officer, Mr. Spock, and my chief medical officer, Dr. McCoy."

"How do you do, gentlemen," she said with a smile and a slight bow of the head.

"Well, well, this is our lucky day! The Enterprise is honored, Miss Renarde." The doctor pulled out a chair for her. He was a slender, long-legged man, with vivid blue eyes and a smile of great sweetness.

"Thank you, Doctor; the honor, I believe, is mine. Everyone knows about the extraordinary record of the Enterprise."

McCoy, seating himself and settling his napkin, looked up from under his brows to give her a half-smile. "I read one of your books," he continued as they started eating their salad. "The one about the Birennian crusaders -- enjoyed it very much."

"I'm glad you liked it," said Tamas. "There isn't much merit in telling that particular story well; it all but tells itself. But it's one of my favorites."

"Now, you don't give yourself enough credit, Miss Renarde. It's the first time I've ever been able to straighten those fellows out."

"Well, thank you then, Doctor." Glancing down, Tamas realized that her salad was almost gone. She'd been eating without attention, but her taste buds had apparently recognized the high quality of the salad even while her mind had been distracted. She looked more carefully and saw that not all the greens were familiar. And what were those tiny purple things? Some kind of flower?

When the menu lit up, Tamas was tempted to order something she couldn't pronounce, just to see what it was. Prudently she instead ordered hotcakes, a dish exotic enough to be interesting yet not totally unfamiliar. In a few minutes a yeoman arrived with her choice, along with bread and soup for the doctor, a hot salad for the first officer, and some sort of vegetable curry for the captain. One taste convinced Tamas that Earth's restaurants had something to learn from the Enterprise.

"This is remarkably good," she said to the table in general. "I'm afraid I have been under a mistaken impression; I thought Starfleet food would be -- boring. Healthy, but dull."

The first officer -- Spock, that was his name -- answered her gravely. "I believe that may be somewhat true on the smaller ships; but as a heavy cruiser may be months without planetfall, it is considered essential to provide as much variety

as possible. The Enterprise's synthesizers are capable of producing almost any comestible requested by the crew." He spoke with precision, in a deep, low voice.

"Fascinating," Tamas said meditatively, and the doctor choked on his soup.

"Spock, she's stolen your line!" McCoy crowed, and Spock raised one high-flung eyebrow in his direction. Tamas saw the captain repress a smile.

"Fascinating?" she asked. "Is that your word, Mr. Spock? Should I refrain from using it?"

"It would be illogical to refrain from the use of a word that best expresses what you wish to say. Also," and a shade of annoyance seemed to cross his face, "I do not use the word as exclusively as Doctor McCoy seems to imply."

"Ah — Miss Renarde, you must explore our ship thoroughly while you are aboard," said Kirk. "As you'll be with us more than three weeks until we got to Sirath, it would be a shame not to make use of all the facilities. You must," he said carefully, "have some very important business there." At her questioning look, he smiled. "Not everyone can have a Federation heavy cruiser pulled out of warp to pick her up."

Tamas took a deep breath. "It seems I am traveling under false pretenses. My business is not of any urgent nature. I'm a historian of sorts, and I lived on Sirath as a child. When I decided to go there to do some research into its history, I asked my sister-in-law to book my passage. It was her supervisor who asked me to return a report on Sirath, preliminary to the planet's admission to the Federation. But it was a most informal arrangement, and I have no official status. Did my pickup delay you long?"

The captain was looking rather stern. "Mr. Spock, about a week, wasn't it?"

"One hundred fifty-eight point three hours, Captain."

Tamas clasped her hands loosely in her lap. Her stomach muscles tightened, and she found to her surprise that she very much disliked the thought of earning these men's contempt. "I owe you an apology, gentlemen," she said, but her voice sounded coolly indifferent in her own ears. She tried again. "I really am very sorry. My family name is well-known in diplomatic circles, and it seems my sister-in-law must have called in a few favors as well." She would have moved heaven and earth to wake me up, Tamas thought. Poor Alice.

The captain was looking skeptical. She touched his elbow lightly with her fingers. "Believe me, Captain, I did not demand immediate transport by Starfleet. I had no idea the family influence was so strong. Next time," she said ruefully, "I'll be more careful."

Kirk relaxed into a smile. "We've had some unfortunate experiences with family influence," he said. "On Beta Niobe Four, about two or three years ago...."

The story was a good one and he told it well, although Doctor McCoy disputed a few points. As Tamas listened and ate, she felt as if something were coming untied inside her. She could really believe now, that she was on her way to Sirath. She felt interested, eager, ready to begin something new. The feeling was as familiar as a smell from long ago, or an old tune, but she hadn't felt that way for so long, not since Peter had died. Her laughter, at the conclusion of the captain's story was social, controlled — if she had learned nothing else over the past eighteen months, she had learned control — but inside her relief was welling up to the brink of tears. She blinked and kept her eyes down, on the plate and the table. She found herself watching Spock's hands — white with a slight sallowness or greenish tinge, vein-ridged, with long, square-tipped fingers, handling knife and fork with precise and economical movements. She looked back to her plate, then up to smile at the captain.

"Am I permitted to ask why the Enterprise is going to Sirath in the first place? That isn't classified information, is it? Or — you were going there, weren't you? They didn't—"

McCoy broke in. "Now, don't you worry about that. We had a good reason to go anyway. There've been reports of a sickness on Sirath that their doctors have never seen before. Nothing too serious, but Sirath was receiving shipments from Azamet before that planet was quarantined. We have to make sure Sirath's sickness

isn't Azamet's plague, and if it is, we have to quarantine Sirath."

"Quarantine Sirath! Isn't that rather drastic for a minor illness?"

"Well, you see, Miss Renarde, it's a minor illness for the Sirathians, but not for the Azamethians. Azametites. Azametines. And it'll be no laughing matter for several other races I can think of that are similar to them -- if it's the same disease, which it probably isn't. The virus hasn't been isolated yet; you can't tell much from symptoms when different species are involved. All we know is that the disease is new to the planet's doctors, and ships from Azamet were there, which is enough to worry us."

"Doctor, there are many different kinds of people on the Enterprise -- isn't there danger to some of them?" She was careful not to glance at Spock.

But it was he who answered her. "Only Terrans will beam down to the planet's surface, Miss Renarde," he said. "We have little useful data on most of the humanoid species, but Earth has already been exposed. A trading ship from Azamet arrived at a major Earth port approximately one point six years ago. The fact that no unusual outbreak of illness was reported seems to indicate that Terrans are immune, as the ship was certainly contaminated. The crew died shortly after planetfall. It was not until almost one year later that the plague on Azamet was discovered and the planet quarantined. The medical authorities on Azamet had failed to report the plague outbreak, most illogically, because the trade interests of that planet are so strong that it was feared that economic collapse would result from the quarantine. As, indeed, it would."

"Excuse me, Mr. Spock," she said curiously, "but, if they were right about the economic collapse, what was illogical about not reporting the disease? I can see that it was immoral, but not illogical."

"It was illogical, Miss Renarde, in terms of their own survival. The economic collapse following a long period of heavy plague mortality may be expected to be worse than that following temporary restraint of trade. As a matter of record, the planet is now in complete disarray, despite the best efforts of Federation medical and research teams.

"But there is also," he continued, "a logic of morality, which has its own self-evident axioms and generates its own theorems. To risk death to others for the sake of one's own economic gain is as grossly illogical in the moral sphere as to pay a credit to buy a dollar in the economic sphere."

Temas looked up at his shadowed eyes. "You are quite right, of course, Mr. Spock. I hadn't thought of morality as being a logical exercise."

"Watch out, Miss Renarde," said McCoy. "We haven't warned you about Spock yet, but I think you ought to know the danger."

Temas looked at him warily.

"Spock here is the galaxy's more irresistible male. We think it's something to do with those pointy ears." Involuntarily, Temas looked at Spock. She had forgotten about the pointed ears. There they were. They fit his face so well that they didn't seem strange. She wrenched her gaze away from his ears, conscious that she was staring. Spock's face was unreadable.

"Yep, those you see right there. Calculated to drive women wild. I'm thinking of picking up a pair myself, next time I'm on Vulcan."

Kirk moved in his chair, as if he were about to protest, but Temas forestalled him. "Doctor," she said calmly, "I assure you, I'm not that susceptible."

"Susceptible to what? Vulcans, or me in pointy ears?"

She choked on her drink. "Neither," she said when she could breathe. "I'm not susceptible to anything." And she wondered if that sounded wistful. "What is this drink, Captain?" she asked. "It's marvelous." The glasses had appeared after the table had been cleared. The drink in them was softest green, and tasted like fruit juice just at the sparkling point, but paler and subtler than any fruit she could think of.

"A mild apple wine, Miss Renarde, from a small planet about a thousand light-years from here. They started out with Terran apples, but God only knows what they did with them afterwards. It's one of the few things our synthesizers can't

synthesize. Why don't you bring it with you, and I'll show you around the ship. Mr. Spock and Dr. McCoy have duties to attend to."

"Jim--"

"I'm sure Sickbay can't spare you, Doctor. Excuse us, gentlemen."

Temas found herself standing in the corridor.

"May I show you around the ship, Miss Renarde?" asked Captain Kirk, with a slight bow.

"It really didn't sound as if I had much choice, Captain," Temas answered, her eyes smiling at him.

"Oh, you have a choice; it's McCoy and Spock who don't. Later, McCoy can show you Sickbay, and Spock may show you the computer, if you ask him nicely. But now, I intend to show you the bridge."

"The keys to the city, Captain? I am honored."

"Damn it, am I that easy to read? You hardly know me; what gives you the idea that I'm enamored of my ship? It may be true," he said, smiling, but not easily, "but how do you know it?"

"Captain, I'm sorry if I've invaded your privacy. I didn't know there was any secret about your love for the Enterprise. It certainly seems plain enough, and speaks well for both you and your ship." They were at the bridge, having taken several corridors and a turbolift. The large viewscreen was the first thing to strike the eye, showing stars scattered against a background so black as to tempt one to touch it to see if it was really there. The stars moved towards them in a leisurely fashion, and as she stared at them, Temas found herself leaning forward with the feeling that she was falling down an endless void. Kirk gave her shoulders a slight squeeze.

"Wake up. It's all an illusion, you know, built up on the screen by our sensors."

Temas shook her head. "It's not real?"

"Miss Renarde, this is Lieutenant Sulu. He can manage that question, I believe."

A black head turned, and revealed a smallish man with strong facial bones and a smile like sunshine. "It's real, all right, but this is not what you'd see if you were outside. The sensors see what we can't, and translate the data into our terms for the screen. There are really, for instance," he pointed at the screen, "three small red stars off to our left. We can show them up close." His hand moved over the panel at his right; the red stars were suddenly almost in the ship with them. "Or farther out, and the computer tells us where they really are. Except that 'where they really are' doesn't have much meaning in warp, and we'd have to drop to sublight speed for you to see them with your own eyes."

"Fascinating," said Temas, and caught a startled glance from a woman at a console on her right.

"Miss Renarde," said Kirk, "this is our communications officer, Lieutenant Uhura. Something tells me you two will like each other. But, Miss Renarde, if you continue to say 'fascinating' in just that tone, you're going to collect a lot of odd looks on this trip."

Uhura laughed a lovely laugh. "I'm afraid that's true, Miss Renarde; Mr. Spock has so taken over that word that the rest of us hardly dare to find anything more than mildly interesting."

Temas laughed too, and reached to grasp Uhura's hand. "Oh, dear, I can see I'll need a tutor. Do you know anyone who'd undertake the job?"

Uhura glanced at the captain. "Well," she suggested almost shyly, "maybe I could help."

"I'd love that. I really need someone, Lieutenant."

"I'm usually in Main Mess around 0130."

"I'll look for you there," Temas promised. "And -- thank you." She felt a slight, insistent pressure on her elbow. The captain was steering her in the direction of the turbolift. When the door closed, she sighed. "That's a very impressive sight, Captain, almost good as a window."

"We do have a real window, but it's nothing you'd like to see while we're in warp."

"You do? Of course I would! How many chances will I get, after all? It's not likely I'll ever be on a Federation heavy cruiser again, Captain. Just tourist ships, with shutters always on the window, until you get where you're going."

"You won't like it, but I'll show you. Observation Deck," he said to the lift. "And in return, I'd much rather you called me Jim."

"Jim," said Tamas obediently, as they got out and headed down another corridor.

Another door, and they found themselves in a large dark room dominated by a huge clearsteel port. The port was filled with a watery light that was not quite seeable. It was uniformly dim -- no, there were bright spots -- stars -- no, not stars -- something else, almost there, but not quite. Tamas approached the port, holding on to the rail before it. She stared at what wasn't there, then took a long, shuddering breath, and wrenched her eyes away. "Enough," she whispered, and they turned to the door, which opened to admit Spock. Tamas darted through, and leaned against the bulkhead to compose herself. "I'm glad I saw it, Jim," she said when Kirk joined her.

"It isn't an easy sight to take, for most of us. Even after you're used to it, it makes you uncomfortable. Spock isn't spooked, though. He'll stay in there for an hour or so, now. Each to his own."

"Tell me about Mr. Spock, Jim. I've never known any Vulcans, except just to be introduced. They always seemed very cold and distant, but Doctor McCoy teased Mr. Spock as if he were a human being. At least, I certainly thought he was teasing."

"Yes, that's their principal method of interaction. No one, but no one can get McCoy's goat like Spock, when he wants to. And no one but Bones can get Spock's goat at all. That's because he walks in where anyone with any sense would fear to tread. He makes fun of his physical appearance, for God's sake! And he gets away with it, though sometimes I wonder why Spock doesn't wrap both Bones's arms around his neck and shove his hands in his mouth. But usually he confines himself to one utterly devastating remark. It's enough, too. But they're the best of friends. Don't tell either of them I said that. Spock thinks McCoy is so illogical as to impair his status as a thinking being. He respects his medical ability, so he's even more annoyed by the 'intuitive old country doctor' act. McCoy is infuriated by Spock's 'more logical than thou' business, and he also genuinely wants to help Spock get the Human side of himself out in the open. He doesn't think it's good for Spock to be a Vulcan all the time. He's half Human, so Bones thinks he ought to act it."

"Half Human? It doesn't show." Tamas yawned before she could stop herself. "Jim, I think I'd better sleep awhile. I'm totally dead on my feet. Thank you so much for the tour of your lovely lady."

"I'll take you to your quarters. You really ought to have a map printed out before you go anywhere, just at first. You'll look green, but you'll get where you're going. And back."

"Show me what to say to the computer, and I'll do it, Jim. I need all the help I can get."

CHAPTER 2

The computer proved obliging about printing maps, and Tamas was following one the next day when she entered Main Mess. Spotting Uhura, she hastily programmed a sandwich and carried it to the table. A tall, fair woman in science department blue smiled up at her.

"Tamas Renarde, Christine Chapel," said Uhura. "Chris is the head nurse and chief wailing wall for Doctor McCoy, Tamas."

That explained the slightly harried expression that underlay Chapel's smile. "I feel I already know you, Miss Renarde," she said in a pleasantly low pitched voice. "When the town has only four-hundred-odd inhabitants, gossip travels fast, and a visitor is a treat."

"Good God, what have I done to be gossipped about? Is that chili sauce -- could you pass it over here, please? And call me Tamas, if that doesn't break any arcane rule of star ship etiquette."

Uhura laughed. "You don't have to do anything to be talked about in a small town, Tamas; you just have to be. But the Enterprise's grapevine is pretty mild. We know that you're a popular historian, that you're going to Sirath for research, that we dropped out of warp to pick you up -- family influence, I gather -- and that the captain showed you around the ship last night and dropped you off at the door to your quarters. That's about all."

"That's all, is it? No measurements, no details of my married life?"

"Widowed," said Chapel. "About...", she studied Tamas consideringly, "1.75 meters. Shall I go on?"

The word "widowed" hit Tamas hard. She took a bit of her sandwich as cover, and spoke indistinctly around it. "Delicious. I suppose if I'm aboard long enough, I'll forget to be surprised at the food. It's all wonderful. Am I allowed to defend myself?" she asked, when she could speak clearly.

"Against what?" Uhura looked startled.

"Family influence. I guess that's what got me aboard all right, but I didn't know it myself until last night. You see, Peter -- my husband -- died suddenly about a year and a half ago. Just got sick and died, and he was only my age. It was ... quite a shock. Until recently, I was half-dead myself, and I know my sister-in-law and her husband were worried. They would call me, invite themselves to dinner, take me places -- I just went along with whatever they suggested. It was less trouble; my sister-in-law's hard to withstand. And I didn't care. Then one day I was remembering Sirath, and I realized how little I know of the planet's history. I looked it up in the library, and there wasn't much, but what there was, was -- fascinating. I know, Uhura, but what other word is there? Intriguing. Captivating. Surprising. Do you know, they haven't had a war for over a thousand Solar years? For a humanoid race, that's amazing. And they claim to have had the same Emperor all that time, though of course not too many Federation historians accept that idea, as the Sirathian life span is about the same as ours. I lived on Sirath as a child, and my parents died there. One day, I realized I wanted to go back. So I asked my sister-in-law, who travels a lot for the government, to get me a ticket. I thought she'd know more about schedules and things than I would, since I haven't been off Earth for years. I didn't think she'd use my mother's name, which she must have done, and also get me an unofficial Federation assignment. I gather you can't just book passage for Sirath."

"No, you certainly can't," said Uhura. "Merchant ships go there now and then, and a diplomatic ship or medical run once in awhile, but there isn't any tourist trade. Did you think it was like a Mars run, Tamas?"

"I guess I imagined a ship every six weeks or so, for researchers, visitors, and rich tourists. That's me times three, you see. Anyway, this trip has the first thing I've consciously wanted since Peter died, and my relatives probably thought it was a good sign. So here I am, and beginning to wake up. I did apologize for the drop out of warp, but I can't be sorry when I'm so glad. Can I?" She looked at the other two women, and read acceptance in their eyes. "And that's enough and more than enough about me. What about you two? How do you like working on this beautiful ship? It's enough to make me wish I'd gone to Starfleet Academy. Almost."

Chapel and Uhura looked at each other and grimaced. "Well, sometimes," began Uhura, "I wish I'd never heard of Starfleet, or the Enterprise, either. But mostly, I wouldn't trade with anyone in the galaxy. The languages you hear! We have tapes of native speakers speaking over two thousand different languages, and every now and then, we get to add one to the files. They're all different, but

with similarities, the way humanoids are different and similar. There must be something in a humaniform shape that pushes us to communicate vocally. Of course, the non-humanoid languages are another problem entirely--"

"Enough, Uhura! You can tell Tamas all your language theories some other time, when I won't have to listen again. And I," said Chapel, with an anticipatory gleam in her eye, "will demonstrate the microbiological evidence for the unitary origin theory. But right now I'm due back on duty and so, I think, are you."

They left Tamas sitting alone over her coffee with a feeling that her few weeks as not enough time. She wanted to know these women better.

♦♦♦

Later that afternoon, Tamas heard the door signal. "Come." The door opened to admit Uhura.

"How about a cup of coffee and some talk?" Uhura looked around the cabin. "And how about in my quarters? This place would depress a tribble! They ought to have fixed it up a little when they heard you were coming, Tamas. Don't you have some pictures you could put up, or anything?"

"There's Peter, there on the computer terminal. That's all. I don't live here, you know. I can stand it."

"Well, I can't, honey. Out with you and me. My quarters aren't far."

They picked up coffee on the way, and some sweet fried wontons. Uhura's quarters were a revelation. The walls may have been tan underneath, but they were covered with brilliantly hued curtains. The bed was white, with a narrow strip of red and black cloth down the center. A holo of a large family group stood on the desk. Uhura pulled out the desk chair for Tamas, and stretched herself on the bed, kicking off her boots. "There, that's better. Where'd I put my coffee? Aaah. Well, how do you like the Enterprise?"

"It's wonderful, Uhura; what do you want me to say?"

"Honey, say whatever you think. It won't hurt my feelings. You could hate the Enterprise, and it wouldn't change my opinion of her."

"No," Tamas laughed, "only of me!"

"That's true, but I like to meet unusual people. Makes the trip more interesting. If you do hate her, though, don't tell Mr. Scott. Or the captain, either."

"Is Mr. Scott the man with the accent who read the lesson this morning in the chapel?"

"Right, he does that a lot. He's the chief engineer, and the ship is his baby. Specifically, the engines are his babies. And the captain isn't quite so obvious, but the Enterprise means just as much to him, but in a different way. Mr. Scott loves the engines, but the captain loves something else, I'm not quite sure what. He loves her for what she does rather than what she is, I think. It's the adventure, and the crew, not so much the metal."

"I think I see what you mean," said Tamas, and was silent.

After a moment, Uhura broke the silence. "But you still haven't told me what you think, you know."

"Well. To be perfectly frank -- I'm envious to the tips of my toes. I really do wish I'd gone to Starfleet Academy. Of course, I wouldn't have met Peter if I had. And I probably wish it for all the wrong reasons. That is, I don't yearn for danger, and I don't think I would have enjoyed many of the missions I've heard about, but I do envy the closeness you all seem to feel with one another. There's a feeling of trust, of relying on the other person, that you can almost touch."

Uhura propped herself on one elbow and looked Tamas straight in the eyes. "That's true," she said, wonderingly, "but how did you see it so quickly? We've done enough together, some of it not very pleasant, that we've learned to trust one another. Anyone who can't be trusted is transferred, even if the captain has to pull strings. The result is to build a closeness, but it also tends to isolate us from the rest of humanity."

"I don't see that; you seem to be able to reach out to outsiders. You're doing it now." Tamas finished her coffee, and turned to put the cup down. "Aren't

you?" she asked, turning back to Uhura.

"Yes, I suppose so. I like you, and I'd like to get to know you better. We need all the friends we can get in this universe. But friendship isn't an exclusive relationship. Friendship is roomy. Love, on the other hand....

"Temas, you loved Peter. Can you imagine yourself married to him, taking off for a five-year trip, risking your life now and then, and giving absolute loyalty to the captain? Can you?"

Temas took a deep breath. "No. Not if I knew Peter first. But what if I had the job first? Then it would come with the territory, so to speak. The job would be part of me, and everything else would have to work around that. It would work out."

Uhura sighed. "That's what I would like to think. And it may be true. but all I know is that among the officers who have been with the Enterprise the longest there have been many love affairs, but not permanent marriages. And these are all mature, loving people. It makes you wonder." She stared into her empty coffee cup.

"You would think, Uhura," began Temas hesitantly, "that the officers would attach to each other."

Uhura cocked her head at Temas. "Are you speaking in generalities, or did you have something specific in mind? Or someone?" Temas felt her face grow hot. "To be truthful," said Uhura, "when I first came on the Enterprise, I went through a traumatic period of wishful thinking about the captain. But that wore off. He likes women -- he likes them a lot -- but he's too good a captain to sleep with the people he orders around. How could he keep any objectivity? Suppose he had to send down a landing party including the woman he'd just made love to? Or worse, the woman he'd had a fight with? I still think he's -- I can't even tell you what I think he is -- he's so good, Temas, and so good at what he does. But I don't hear bells in his voice anymore, and I don't shiver when he passes. So," she concluded, "don't hang back on my account," and she smiled demurely. "I imagine captaining a ship is not the only thing he's good at."

"So far, his talents seem quite adequate," said Temas. "Should I let you know, if I find out?" She laughed delightedly. "Uhura, you're blushing!"

"Hush, you'll blow my cover! I have half the people on this ship convinced that I can't blush!" She stared coolly at Temas, who was bent double in silent laughter. "It is most distasteful for me to be subjected to this display of Human emotion."

"Stop, stop. Give me a minute, please! There." Temas smoothed her face out into reasonable composure. "Was that Mr. Spock? Can you do everyone in the crew?"

"I can do everyone on the bridge, anyway. You get to know them pretty well after awhile."

"Tell me some about Mr. Spock, Uhura. I'd like to know more about him."

Uhura sat up and crossed her legs underneath her. "You haven't fallen for Spock, have you? How unoriginal! Sorry. Mr. Spock, right. Let's see, he looks like a Vulcan, but he's half Human; his mother is from Earth. You've heard of Ambassador Sarek? Well, Spock is his son. He was raised on Vulcan. Most of the time, he seems all Vulcan, but there are depths beneath depths. His best friend is Captain Kirk, but I think most of us would go pretty far for Spock. I can't tell why. He's so invulnerable that it makes him vulnerable, if you see what I mean, because it's so awful for him to crack. Not like the rest of us, who are full of cracks anyway. His blood is green. I've actually seen him blush; the tips of his ears turned green. Temas! Now you're blushing! What have you got for Mr. Spock?"

"Nothing, really, it isn't anything. Just one of those things, you know. It will pass. Please don't mention it to anyone; it's so stupid and embarrassing."

"Mother Uhura's confessional, right here. And you'd better not mention it to Chris, okay? She went through the same thing, only worse. She's grown up a lot since then, but there's no point in opening old wounds."

"No, no! I wouldn't think of it! I don't know how we got on to this in the first place. But it feels good to talk to you, Uhura. Let me come again,



sometime?"

"Any time at all. Buzz first, and if a man answers, hang up."

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The days passed pleasantly. Daily, Tamas learned more names and faces; everyone aboard seemed to know her name from the start. She saw more of the captain than she would have expected; he often seemed to go out of his way to be available for meals, conversation, or guided walks.

One evening, outside her quarters, he ignored her offered hand and grasped her shoulder instead. His kiss was gentle and undemanding.

"What's this? Not the beginning of a shipboard romance?" she teased.

"Why not? Life can get dull between stars."

Tamas studied his face closely -- half a smile, his eyes more amused than ardent. "Why not, indeed?" Her own words, her own willingness, surprised her.

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She was surprised, too, but how soon she felt at home in a tin box hurtling through subspace. In fact, she feared that the company aboard the tin box would spoil her for ordinary human gatherings, where the stupid outweighed the intelligent by at least three to one. There were no stupid people on the Enterprise. They seemed without exception to be intelligent, forward-looking, adventurous, and curious. And they all had interests -- some were musicians, some artists, some caught up in a particular phase of xenobiology or astronomy. Sulu gave demonstrations in fencing and hand-to-hand combat, and Uhura taught Tamas a few simple throws. Spock played his Vulcan lyrette in Main Recreation one evening, and Uhura sang. There was a lecture on starship nutrition and exercise by McCoy. The captain played chess with Spock, and everyone seemed to stop by to kibitz.

Tamas herself was asked to give a talk about Sirath, which was so well attended that she had to repeat it for those who'd been on duty during the first one. She was impressed by the interest of the crew. The pictures she had to show were nothing new; any crew member who wanted could have called them up on his viewscreen. But the viewpoint she had, as one who'd spent part of her childhood there, was unique.

"My memories," she told them, "are those of a child, and moreover, a child alone on the planet. I was not reared as a Sirathian child would be, because my parents were from Earth. But my friends were Sirathian children, my parents' friends were Sirathian adults, and all our staff were Sirathian. I had a nurse and a tutor who were Sirathian, and I learned the language in the best way possible -- through necessity.

"Let me give you a little background on Sirath, for those who haven't already read everything about it in the ship's library. The name first. Sirath is, first, the name of the oldest city on the planet, the tribal home, apparently, of the Emperor's family. It goes back at least fifteen hundred or our years -- say, a thousand of theirs. Also, Sirath is the name of the only true nation there. The tribal city, you see, prospered and grew. There is some disagreement among Federation historians as to whether the growth was by conquest or, as the Sirathian historians claim, by peaceful means. They say that group after group asked to place itself under the rule of the Emperor. The same Emperor, for one of the most firmly held of their beliefs is that the Emperor is immortal. His title is Immortal Emperor, and his people, from what I can remember, no more doubt his immortality than they doubt the sun in the sky. 'Belief' is a poor word for it -- 'fact' is more accurate. Plants grow in the spring, two and two are four, the Emperor lives forever....

"Whether or not the planet had wars of conquest in the past, there are no wars now. Sirath the nation constitutes almost the entire planet; the little bits that are left are almost uninhabited. Therefore, when the first Sirathians contacted were asked for the name of their planet, they said Sirath, and it has become known as Sirath to the Federation and Sirathians alike. The only word they had formerly was one corresponding to our 'world'; it means, essentially, 'everything.'

"Here is a picture of the city from your files. I believe my father took this

one; holography was his specialty. This is taken from a hill outside the city. I always think it looks like a flock of pink sheep. The buildings are all low, constructed from the pink clay that the city is built on. Instead of smooth walls and straight lines, as might be expected in an Earth city, here we have rounded, uneven walls on the outsides, bulging out at about shoulder height. Inside, however," she said, switching to another picture, "the walls are sculptured in smooth curves, very easy on the eyes. The floors are usually covered with a kind of straw matting, and frequently with a cloth over that. The windows tend to be round, or sometimes a more unusual shape, glazed, and dressed with shutters of cloth or matting. I can see now, with eyes that have been on Earth for years, that all the rooms have a common Sirathian look to an outsider, but I assure you there are varying preferences, styles, and levels of sophistication among them, as among us.

"Here you see some Sirathians. The usual greeting, in the city at least, is like this." She clapped her hands politely twice. "Much more efficient than anything we've come up with. No need to know the name, the title, the age or sex. Just clap. After that, of course, it gets more complicated."

"How'd it go?" Uhura asked afterwards.

"Pretty well, I think. No one that I saw went to sleep."

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Temas and Uhura spent long hours talking about Uhura's exploration of languages. Uhura programmed all the current data on xenophilology into the computer. They spent happy afternoons drawing curves and plotting relationships. "You should be writing a book on this, Uhura."

"Honey, I can't make up my mind which theory to support! No one wants to read, 'This may be true, but then again, maybe not!' The trouble is," she said thoughtfully, "I know too much. If I could ignore half the data we've gathered, I could make out a beautiful case for Macready's tripolar origin, limited dispersion theory—and if I could ignore the other half, I'd be a perfect Kamasuriite!"

Temas choked and spilled coffee on her blouse. "Drat! Now I'll have to change before supper."

"Dining with anyone I know?" Uhura asked innocently.

"The captain. Do I take a bow?"

"No, no. Just enjoy it. He's charming company, isn't he?"

"My God, is nothing sacred around here?"

"Hardly anything. But I'm not stepping on your toes, am I?" Uhura asked anxiously. "Tell me if I am. I got the idea that you and the captain are just good friends."

"That's exactly right."

"Very good friends."

"Uhura!" Temas broke up completely, and spilled the rest of her coffee. "Now I really do have to go and change. You witch; look what you did to me. How can you just lie there and laugh at what used to be a perfectly functional human being?"

CHAPTER 3

Temas raised herself up on one elbow, and looked at the captain, studying his drowsy, contented smile, his rumpled hair. "Dear Jim," she said, "thank you so much."

He looked slightly surprised, and slightly pleased with himself. "Shipboard romance not so bad, mmh?"

"I didn't think it would be, if you recall. But I'm very glad to find that I can enjoy this. So much of me seemed to die with Peter.... It seems as if, ever since I came on board the Enterprise, bits of me have been resurrecting. This is a very nice bit; thank you for resurrecting it." She pressed her lips to his shoulder. "What schedule are you on, Jim? Are you about to go to sleep? Should I

leave?"

"Well. I was on my way to the gym for a workout, but passing you in the corridor seemed to change the kind of workout I was planning. I guess I'd better get a few of those never ending reports out of the way. Are you sleepy? If my voice won't bother you, stay by all means. I won't do anything confidential."

"In that case, I believe I'll take half an hour for a nap, lulled by nonconfidential reports. Your voice is a joy, Jim."

He looked at her sharply, and she laughed aloud. "Oh, Jim, don't look so suspicious! You amazingly vain creature! How many women have fallen in love with you that you're afraid I'll be one more?" She rolled over as he stood up. "I've had a lovely time, and I feel a great affection for you, dear Jim, but I am not in love with you, even in that fetching outfit."

He grinned and didn't rush for his clothes. "Actually, I think it's the uniform that gets 'em," he remarked. She made a rude noise and pulled the covers over her head.

When she awoke, the lights were dimmed, and Kirk was gone. She hastened to shower and dress, wondering what the likelihood would be of someone buzzing the door while she was in the captain's cabin. When satisfied that she looked neat and unruffled, she opened the door and walked out boldly, trying to look like an ensign who'd just delivered a supply report. She needn't have worried. The people going by seemed not to see her at all, even the ones who would normally say hello. She was the Invisible Woman as long as she was in the vicinity of the captain's quarters. It was a relief, but also a little disconcerting; she wondered if this was Starfleet protocol, or merely Enterprise custom. As soon as the curve of the ship hid the captain's door, she became visible again. A yeoman said, "Hello, Miss Renarde;" an ensign waved. Tamas realized that in the short time she had been aboard she had developed her own place in the neighborhood. She was at home here, more than she'd been anywhere since Peter had died.

Then Spock passed and nodded, and Tamas got chills.

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Three days later they were in orbit around Sirath. All Terrans were allowed shore leave, but a sterilizer booth was set up around the transporter platform so that no Sirathian virus would be beamed aboard. "Tamas," said Kirk, "I know you intend to stay on Sirath, but I hope you'll regard the Enterprise as your home until we leave."

"Does Starfleet want to pay for my room and board, Jim? I don't think so." He smiled. "Believe me, the orders I received concerning you were very clear about making the Enterprise of use in any reasonable fashion. I can't do anything that would imperil our mission, but room and board are quite within the rules."

"And the captain's services? Do those fall within the rules, too?" She touched the side of his neck lightly.

"Those are an unadvertised extra, at the captain's discretion," he murmured, drawing her to him.

"Captain," came Spock's voice from two meters away, "I am sorry to interrupt you, but we have a slight problem concerning the crew members who will be beaming down."

Tamas' insides jumped so that she thought Mr. Spock must notice. She moved slowly away from Kirk as he released her, hoping she looked as unconcerned as he did. Staring coolly, she hoped, into Spock's calm eyes, she felt her face grow hot. "I will leave you to your duties, Captain," she said, and retreated blindly along the corridor. She gathered from the conversation between Kirk and Spock that the doctor thought Spock should stay aboard ship until the virus proved harmless to Vulcans. Spock did not seem pleased with this program.

I imagine he'd be a hard man to withstand, Tamas thought.

When she arrived at the transporter room later in the day she was surprised to see that McCoy was waiting his turn to beam down while Spock was nowhere in sight. The doctor was grumbling to all and sundry about the transporter; Tamas suspected she saw relief on some faces when she engaged him in conversation.

"I thought Mr. Spock was coming down too, but I don't see him here."

"Spock? He wanted to, but I wouldn't authorize it. We don't have any idea how this thing'll affect Vulcans. He gave me some arguments, but I tuned him out when he started on Logic. Sent him to the captain. Jim's not about to let Spock take any foolhardy risks -- he saves those for himself?"

"Doctor, wouldn't Mr. Spock be rather hard to turn down?"

"For Jim? You've gotta be kidding!: The doctor was obviously amazed. "Y'know, you don't see the same side of Jim as the rest of us do. He's a good friend, but that's never stopped him from pulling rank. And when he pulls it, even Spock listens. Hell, even I do!" Tamas laughed at the outrage in his voice, but she was intrigued by this view of the captain. He was younger than other ship captains she'd met, handsome, polite, charming. She hadn't tried to imagine him laying down the law to his crew. And she could not, by any stretch of the imagination, see him making Spock do something he didn't want to do. Of course, McCoy had a habit of exaggerating. But -- Spock certainly wasn't here. She put the matter aside for further thought. McCoy was asking her something.

"-- down alone? No one to share the night life with?"

"I wonder if Sirath has night life," Tamas said, startled. "I was too young to know, before." She returned to the question. "No, Doctor, to tell the truth, I'm avoiding everyone I know. I want to meet Sirath again, without intrusion. I feel as if my childhood is down there, and I don't want anyone else along to spoil my chances of finding it." She took out a small map. "Doctor, do you know why everyone is beaming to this spot in the center of town?"

"I think that's the main platform in the city, that's all, and it's silly to beam into the wide open spaces when you can go to a platform. Not that it's much better, you understand."

"A transporter! Maybe it isn't my childhood I'm going to find, after all. There wasn't one on the whole planet when we were there."

"If you ask me, it's no improvement." Then it was the doctor's turn to beam down, and shortly after, Tamas'.

She arrived wide-eyed, and had to be reminded by the flashing light to leave the platform. Around the transporter was a small crowd of young Sirathians watching the Terrans arrive. Tamas hardly noticed them. She was staring at the city and the sky, and breathing in the smells of Sirath. The city hadn't changed. The same pink-sheep buildings, the same quiet crowds. The air was full of a faint, lemony scent that she remembered well. It came from the street, which was clay and rock. Through small holes in the paving, grew gray-blue herbs that, when stepped on, gave off their scent. Breathing deep, Tamas found herself momentarily confused. Was she a grown woman or a child? Was it today, or twenty-five years ago? She looked at the sky, which resembled Earth's blue, but pale and distant and cloudless, and gave herself up to pure happiness.

Then she looked at the children and clapped her hands politely. They responded enthusiastically, with what sounded like a round of applause. They were very Earthlike in appearance, and the youngest of them were as cuddly as mammalian babies always are. Their most unusual feature was a definitely piebald appearance. They were a patchwork people; their skin tones were blues and browns, the colors divided in great, swooping lines on faces and bodies. Most of the children had a healthy head of hair, but it was usually a partial head, as there was little or no hair in the blue areas of their scalps. Tamas passed through them, touching their shoulders lightly, as she remembered adult Sirathians touching hers in childhood. One of the girls held a ball. Tamas found herself very tempted to start a game of krupgen. Did adults join in children's games? She didn't remember any having done so. Tamas put temptation behind her and proceeded in the direction of the library. To her delight, she found it without recourse to her map. The door stood open to the warm outer air.

Entering, Tamas stood still and looked around for the librarian. All along the sides of the room were benches built out from the walls, much like the sleeping platforms in the private houses. They were actually part of the structure of the

building, draped with cloths in subdued colors and leafy patterns. On them lounged several Sirathians, studying books or viewing microfilms in hand-held viewers. She felt the sensation her presence created. The adults were here too sophisticated to stare at an off-worlder as the children had, but they managed to see a lot in small glances. She walked over to one, clapped her hands, and said, "Reader, will you tell me where the librarian is?" The old woman put down her viewer, rose, clapped, and led Temas to a young man in a green robe, with a long braid hanging from the small brown area of his head.

The librarian spoke first. "Terran, what may I do to assist you?"

"Librarian, I am a recorder, and I wish to record the past years of Sirath, so that we on Terra may know of them. But I can read very little of your language. If you will show me what films and books to record, I will copy them and translate them later."

"Recorder, I will help as I can. I am glad that Terra wants to know of Sirath."

As they worked through the day, Temas was more and more grateful for his help. The library was a confusing mixture of old and new. Sirath had barely reached the stage of space flight when contacted by the Federation. In many ways, their culture was still at that level. But the transporter platform and the modern computer in the library testified to a definite interest on the part of the Sirathians in advanced technology. The young librarian played the computer like a beloved instrument. His formality lasted only a short time. Soon he was not only giving her capsules to copy, but showing her choice bits of them, with explanations. She couldn't really appreciate the color pictures, as Sirathians saw some infrared that Terrans didn't. But there was a lively sketch of a man with a man with a disgusted expression, cleaning a pan of pira berries. He was, Temas was told, a Prime Minister of about three hundred Earth years before, who had been found guilty of trying to bankrupt a merchant who wouldn't sell out to him. The merchant had found himself richer by one inexperienced servant for the next Sirathian year. "Which," the librarian pointed out, "was good for both of them, as the merchant gained a servant and the Prime Minister received training for another trade. By the end of the year, he thought it expedient at least to appear humbled, though whether he really was, there is some doubt!"

They laughed together. "Librarian, is this law still in effect, the one that made the Prime Minister a servant to the merchant?"

"We have no such law, recorder. The emperor decided that case. When a wrong has been done by a powerful person to a less powerful one, but it is not a wrong stated in the law, it may be appealed to the Emperor. You do not have an Immortal Emperor on earth, do you, Recorder?" He looked very sorry for her. "He is above all laws. Laws are necessary to run a nation, but the laws have no heart. Like a computer, they may at times be used for undesirable ends. Without the Emperor, those who are poor would be at the mercy of those who are rich. Is it not so where you live, Recorder?"

Temas found herself very uncomfortable, indeed. "At the mercy of the rich? No, Librarian, I don't think so. Not really. Well, maybe once in a while. I don't know. Tell me about the Emperor. How is he? I knew him when I was a child."

"Recorder, he is as he always is. If you knew him as a child, you must not neglect leaving your name at the palace. He will want to see you. Also, the Imperial library may have some matter of interest to you."

"I wonder if the Emperor would remember me? I don't want to offend against courtesy, Librarian."

"Then, Recorder, you must be sure to leave your name. Within a day or two, someone will communicate with you, perhaps a secretary, perhaps the Immortal Emperor himself."

"You speak as though you know."

"Why, yes, Recorder, everyone knows how to speak to the Palace." The librarian looked surprised that there should be a question.

"But, Librarian, does the Emperor speak directly to his subjects, then?"

"Oh yes, Recorder, indeed he does. My sister left her name on her last visit to me, and the very next day she was seen by the Emperor himself! And all she wanted to do was to complain about the grain prices. She is a farmer, and quite a complainer, but she said the Emperor listened as closely as if she had been the Prime Minister. But I hope the Prime Minister is more interesting." They smiled together, and the librarian led Tamas to the door, indicating the direction of the palace with a vague wave of the hand.

Tamas strolled along the street in the direction the librarian had so casually indicated. The streets began to look familiar; when she came to the imperial palace, she had no trouble recognizing it. The door was black to her eyes, which meant either a black door, or one radiating slightly --because it wasn't noticeably warm --into the infrared. She put her mouth near the ventilator, stooping slightly, and called, "Menet slachenct! A visitor arrives!" Immediately the door was opened by a courteous man in black. He took her name, and asked for her residence. After a moment's hesitation, she named the Enterprise. She had thought to be eager to move to a local inn, but found a reluctance in herself that frightened her for a moment. Was it the beginning of a return to the apathy she'd just escaped? No -- with a shock of surprise, she realized that she was eager to get back to the Enterprise. She wanted to tell Uhura about the library, and find out what the people on shore leave had thought of the planet, and eat amid the friendly noise of the mess hall. It was with a distinct feeling of going home that she made her way to the transporter platform and called to be beamed up.

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Scanning the mess hall, Tamas saw a hand wave in her direction. It belonged to McCoy, who, she noticed, was eating with Spock. Hastily, she tossed her chicken into the recycler and programmed mixed fried vegetables and tofu.

"Hello, gentlemen. How did the first day on the disease go, Doctor?"

"About like we expected. We recorded histories of about thirty Sirathians who've had the thing, and symptoms, blood samples, and so forth. We have tissue samples from dead Azameters--"

"Azametes, Doctor," Spock said, to be acknowledged with an annoyed glance.

"--to compare with what we see here. It's not easy to isolate one virus from all the viruses there are in every humanoid species; it's going to take some time. Especially since the Sirathians aren't all that well studied. We don't know what a healthy Sirathian has in him. They don't even know! Medicine is a backward science on this planet, Tamas. Probably because of a lack of war."

"A what, Doctor? Tamas put her fork down and turned to him in amazement.

"Wh'sure, didn't you say this place had no wars in the last ten centuries or so? That's enough to keep medical science in its infancy right there."

"Mr. Spock," Tamas said, "do you agree?"

Spock put down his fork and steepled his fingers. "It does appear that, for many of the humanoid species we have encountered, war has been a definite prod to medical science. Few have developed advanced medical techniques without the profusion of sick and injured that war provides, and the fear of losing the war that spurs the experimenters to greater efforts. On Vulcan, however--" (here Doctor McCoy cast his eyes to the ceiling) "--medicine would seem to have progressed through logic and persistence, without war."

"Of course," added McCoy. "We don't know how far ahead of itself Vulcan might be now if the Vulcans had kept up the good old ways."

"Doctor, I know you are aware of the very high probability that Vulcan and the Vulcans would not exist today had they not abjured warfare." Tamas felt a surge of gratitude towards the ancient Vulcans who had given up war for logic. She dived into her vegetables, and when she looked up again, Spock was regarding her thoughtfully.

"Well, I had a wonderful day in the library, learning about Sirathian history. Evidently they really haven't had a war in more than a thousand years, of our years. They may not be distinguished medical practitioners, but they are pretty good at

sculpture and drawing. Painting too, I believe, but I can't really tell because of the color differences. And the Emperor seems to be an absolute monarch with a conscience, which is something you don't see very often."

Spock had begun eating again, but at this he stopped with his fork in mid-air and one eyebrow up. "Almost never," he said, "unless you mean a ruler who does evil and then weeps over it."

"No, he really doesn't seem to do any evil, which surprised me, too. He seems to be a benevolent monarch, concerned more for the poor than for the rich, more for the oppressed than for the oppressor. I'm not a first-class historian, Mr. Spock, more of a popularizer, but I know enough to recognize how unusual that is. There is quite an elaborate system for discovering and stopping unjust judges, dishonest officials, and anybody who uses his wealth to push around a poorer person. They've been refining it for 1500 years."

"Ought to be good then," said McCoy.

"Fascinating," said Spock. 'Absolute power corrupts absolutely,' has been a rule very nearly without exception among all humanoid races. If Sirath's Immortal Emperor has escaped that rule, we may have a great deal to learn from him."

Even Vulcans? Tamas wondered, but kept discreet silence.

Chapter 4

The next day Tamas beamed down early and returned to the library. She meant to spend the morning in research, then have lunch with Uhura and maybe do a little shopping.

Leaving the library in good time, she took a roundabout way to the transporter where she was to meet Uhura. She went through the market area of the day, then turned in to a narrow alley between two buildings constructed so close together that she had to follow their curves and bulges to get past. The sounds of the market were quickly absorbed by the masonry, causing it to seem much farther away. She rounded a particularly large bulge, and almost ran down three Sirathians with a pushcart, the only vehicle allowed on city streets. She signaled a polite apology, and began to back up to let them pass.

But one of them spoke to her. "Terran, are you the Recorder who knows the Immortal Emperor?"

Gossip, thought Tamas, that may be the true Galactic common tongue. I wonder if they even gossip on Vulcan, in their highly refined way. "Yes," she said aloud, "I am she. How may I be of service?"

The Sirathians didn't answer, but stood looking at her. They looked as if they were weighing and measuring her, as impolite a look on Sirath as on Earth. Unconsciously she tensed, and was not wholly unprepared when they sprang. She was taller than two of them, but that didn't seem to be much of an advantage. She did manage to throw one with a trick Uhura had taught her. But her momentary stab of pride at a feat she had never accomplished or need before was squelched as the others moved behind her and pinned her arms. She kicked back violently, and found herself falling forward. Then her head was hit from behind, and she blacked out.

When she awoke, she was indoors. She stood up with some difficulty,, and almost lost consciousness again. Breathing slowly and evenly, she tried to see through the pain in her head. The room she was in had shuttered windows and good artificial light. There were doors on three walls, one plainly to the exterior, but that one was halfway around the room from her. Leaning on a wall, she removed her boots and made her way as silently as possible across the room. She stared at the door latch for a moment, trying to work out the quietest way to open it.

An interior door opened suddenly, and her acquaintances of the street were in the room. Tamas wrenched the door open and was halfway out before they grabbed her. One of them had some sort of weapon trained on her. She considered the strength in the arms holding her, and the useful appearance of the weapon, and relaxed. "All right," she said in Standard, "let me sit down." Then she noticed



that her translator was missing. But it didn't matter; they understood that she was giving up. They let go of her, but kept the weapon -- it was some sort of gun, Tamas decided -- trained on her. The two who had held her moved to cover the door. Tamas walked slowly to the sleeping platform that was in the corner of most Sirathian rooms. She wondered if she should have screamed for help. Would her Terran accent have made a cry unintelligible? Or would it have identified her, and would word have been sent to the Enterprise? Too late now, but maybe later. If she had a later. She sat down tiredly, and her head was stabbed by; the movement. She stretched her legs out on the floor, the platform being well below knee height, rested her head cautiously on the wall, and studied her captors. The gun wielder was a woman of middle age, the others men, one young, large and strong, the other older and stocky. It almost looked like a family group, she thought -- Mama, Papa, and Junior, the college boy. Tamas did not speak. She took a certain satisfaction in maintaining what she thought of as Vulcan impassivity, although she doubted that her captors would be impressed.

It seemed a long time before one of them, the Papa type, spoke. "Recorder, we have an important request to make of you." Still Tamas did not speak, although angry thoughts were crowding to her tongue. "We need your help in a project to reform Sirath." Again, he waited for a reply. "I am sure you know what I am talking about. The Emperor, immortal though he be, has ruled too long. You can overthrow him." Tamas started inwardly, but remained outwardly calm. "What is your answer?"

The only thing Tamas had decided was not to let them know she spoke their language. "I do not understand," she said slowly and carefully, exaggerating her normal accent. "Where is --?" She made futile gestures, and finally said "translator" in Standard. Aching to rip them apart in their own tongue, she restrained herself.

Junior said one of the words Tamas would have liked to use. He left by the interior door, and came back with Tamas' translator, which he tossed to her. She fastened it to her belt and turned it on.

"We understood that you spent part of your childhood in this city," said Mama. "You ought to know our language by now." She might have been Tamas' own old tutor, reproving her for inattention. But the gun never wavered.

"Childhood is a long time ago, Guard," said Tamas meekly, assigning Mama the lowest status she could. "And my parents did not want me to learn too much of your tongue, for fear I would become like a Sirathian and forget my Terran birth." This was a gross libel on her parents, and there was certainly no use in offending these people; but reason made way for anger in this small way. Annoying them made her feel better, and she rationalized it as necessary for her own morale.

Junior said suddenly. "We want to overthrow the Emperor, Recorder. And we need your help to do it."

Tamas felt it was fairly safe to use Sirathian body language, if she kept to Standard for her verbal communication. These people probably didn't know that their body language was different from hers, and it would aid in convincing them of her sincerity. So she raised both arms out to the sides as she sat up. "My help! How can one Terran be of assistance in such an undertaking?"

"Do not pretend that you do not know ... what you know! We know that your parents were friends of the Emperor. And that you spent much time in the Imperial palace with them. We know that you know --"

Tamas gritted her teeth. She would not ask what they knew that she knew. She would not.

"We want to use your knowledge, and do no harm to you. But if necessary we will harm you, and then use your knowledge. Our nation and our planet are at stake." Papa was speaking, and Tamas decided to speak back to him. She found neither the gun of Mama nor the muscles of Junior pleasant to contemplate. She kept her eyes on Papa, and asked her questions of him.

"Why are they at stake? What is the matter, Kidnapper?"

"I am a kidnapper now, nor am I very much ashamed of it. It is necessary."

Recorder, you are from Earth. On Earth, everyone does as he wills."

"Well, not precisely, Kidnapper," Tamas said with a twist of her mouth. "We have laws and rules, you know. And government officials. You are far wrong if you think that we can do just as we please."

Papa seemed to summon a spirit of patience. "We also have laws and rules and officials," he said. "We even, for the past two hundred years, have had elections. But over all, above the officials and the law, is the Immortal Emperor. He can abolish the offices; the law is his to interpret or change. No one thing in the whole nation -- soon the whole planet -- is beyond his reach. It is intolerable!"

Tamas found herself stirred despite her position. "But -- is the Emperor a monster, that you so fear him? Does he steal your land or take your children to do battle? Is his rule so unjust?"

There was a sign from Papa, echoed by one across the room. "Come and hold this," said Mama to Junior. "I cannot talk and be sure of my aim." Junior took the weapon, though he looked as if it would be entirely unnecessary for him. Then Mama tried to explain. "It is hard for you to understand; it is hard for our countrymen to understand. We agreed to take you by force because it was so unlikely that you, a friend of the Emperor, would agree to help us. But I feel we must try. The Emperor is a good man and a good ruler. He has oppressed no one, stolen no land, conquered no nation, fought no war. But he rules us. We make laws, which he sets aside at will. Sometimes we agree with what he has done, sometimes we disagree, but what we think does not matter. He does what he wills."

"And you are afraid that he will someday will a great evil?"

"NO," cried Mama, beginning to pace the floor. It was such a human thing to do, that Tamas found herself relaxing involuntarily. "You don't yet understand! His wisdom is great -- and we are totally dependent on it. His mercy is fabled -- and well for us that it is, for we have no appeal from it. He rules most gently, most kindly, most considerately -- but always it is he who rules and we who obey. We want to rule ourselves, to make our own mistakes, to be adults, not children who have everything decided for them!"

Tamas did understand. She had, after all, been born on Earth. She sat silent for a time, thinking back over Earth's history of rulers, revolutions, and bloodshed. The last war on Sirath had been when another country had tried to conquer the Emperor's, more than a thousand years before. Since then, Sirath had grown beyond conquest. Small states had petitioned to join, until almost the whole planet was one nation. But the cost! Not to govern oneself seemed a heavy price to pay, even for peace. She wavered back and forth, then realized with a feeling of relief that it wasn't her problem. She had been silent for some time, thinking, while her captors watched her.

"Well. I do understand, but I'm not sure I agree. In any case, you have the wrong Terran, or the wrong idea about Terrans. There is nothing I can do to help you. Unless you mean -- you don't want me to assassinate the Emperor, do you?"

"No, Recorder," said Papa patiently. "If we wanted to shoot the Emperor, and if it would do any good to shoot him, we could do it very easily ourselves. I myself doubt that he can be killed that way. There must be some other way to overthrow him -- some drug that will make him docile, or some weed that will make him mortal."

"But then, what am I here for? I don't know anything about drugs or weeds on this planet. I can't be any help at all!"

"You are dissembling again, Recorder. You are the only one who can overthrow the Emperor. Shall I tell you how we know? But it is not my story to tell."

Mama spoke. "It is mine, but do not worry. It is very short. Years ago I, who had an office in the government, was at the palace to discuss various matters. Among other things, a revolutionary group had come to light. I asked the Emperor about it, and he had known before I -- someone from the group had come to warn him. He was not at all concerned, however, and spoke quite lightly about it. He even laughed. 'I'm not in any danger,' he said, 'except from one person, a child -- a little Terran girl.' Do you know how many Terran children have ever been on this

planet, Recorder?" The woman held out a hand. "Only one."

Temas concentrated on relaxing her neck, her jaws, and her hands. She took a couple of deep breaths and let them out without screaming. She was now very badly frightened, but she tried to regain her Vulcan face. "It is most likely," she said, "that the Emperor was joking in some way -- perhaps pretending to love the child so much that his heart broke when she left, or making a joke about the games they played. My memory of those years is poor -- perhaps he played a gambling game with me and let me win." The others didn't even answer. Junior handed the weapon back to Mama, and stepped purposefully over to Temas. The time was past for stoicism, she decided. She screamed as loudly as she could. He hit her on her mouth. She screamed again. He grabbed her arms and pushed her through a door into darkness. She stumbled, and felt herself falling, but had landed before she could remember to fall properly. One leg was twisted under her, and she couldn't stand. A light came on, and she saw an ordinary cellar with the ramp the Sirathians found more practical than steps. Junior came down the ramp, and hit her in the ribs. She screamed again, but she wasn't sure why, other than to feign hysteria so they wouldn't ask her anything. But it was so easy that she wasn't sure the hysteria wasn't genuine. She screamed again as he kicked her, then the light went off and he was gone.

To be alone passed for a blessing for the moment. For a while Temas lay still, gathering her strength and giving her eyes time to adjust to the dark. When it became clear that the dark was all but total and that her eyes weren't going to adjust, she rolled and sat on a wave of pain, and felt around for the ramp she had fallen from. Leaning against the side of it, she managed to raise herself to a standing position on her right leg. Her left leg was totally useless and sharply painful.

Hadn't there been a sleeping platform in one corner? Almost every room she'd ever seen on Sirath had one. She vaguely thought she remembered a glimpse of something colorful, perhaps a blanket.

The platform proved to be quite near. She reached it by sitting down and inching her way along the cold floor, close to the wall. Hauling herself onto the low platform and covering up with the blankets was a task that left her dizzy and nauseated, and she lay very still afterwards, thinking of things other than the state of her leg and her stomach.

I can't get out, she thought carefully, because the door is certainly fastened on the other side, and there are no windows. I couldn't get to the top of the ramp, anyway. I couldn't run if I did get out. No one will hear me if I scream, except the people who brought me here. When they come back, I may be able to talk to them. Presumably they will come back eventually, if they think I have their great secret. I wonder if Mama and Papa know that Junior broke my leg? Maybe that would be an opening. Perhaps Uhura will report me when I don't show up for lunch. Surely she'll know I would have let her know, if I could. But right this minute, I can't do anything. I'm tired and hurt, so I ought to sleep. That's the only reasonable thing to do. Logical, Mr. Spock would say. I wonder if Jim will be worried when he hears I didn't show up for lunch. Will Uhura tell anyone, or will she think I just forgot? I ought to sleep.

Sleep proved to be harder to come by than she had supposed, but she eventually achieved it by the simple method of letting all her fear and misery out in a good cry. She fell asleep thinking of Uhura.

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Temas was dreaming. She was in Uhura's colorful quarters, working with her. Uhura had been doing an imitation of McCoy, and Temas was laughing until her sides ached. Suddenly she stopped. "You know this means I'm in trouble, don't you?" she said soberly.

"I know," said the dream Uhura in the doctor's voice, "but we'll take care of it."

Suddenly, Temas was awakened by a whining sound that threw her bolt upright, twisting her leg. She moaned and fell back down, and that was how she appeared on

the Enterprise's transporter platform. The sudden light blinded her, but she could hear the doctor's voice, as if out of her dream, and the small beeping of his tricorder. "All right, over here, take her down. We have to get her off that platform before Uhura comes up." Then she was floating through the doorway on a soft bed, and there was another transporter whine behind her.

Chapter 5

"It's the captain; he wants to see Tamas."

"Tell him he can come on down in a couple of minutes; the leg is almost done. We just have to clean you up, Tamas," McCoy said. "I don't know where they had you, but it can't have been any too clean. No, don't squirm like that. Just relax and let Chris work on you while that leg regenerates." He flashed her a sympathetic smile. "Itches, I know. The less you wiggle, the sooner it'll be done."

Christine was giving her a complete professional bed-bath and a spritz shampoo. "No shower till the morning but now you look quite decent. My love to the captain," she said with a pat and a mischievous look, and was gone.

The regeneration bed didn't seem like the best place to receive visitors, but there appeared to be no choice. Tamas pulled the cover over both legs, the one in the tube and the one out, and pushed the button that raised the head of the bed. She had just arranged her robe over the top half of her when the door opened. Nobody bothered to signal in sickbay, she noticed. Kirk was outside, with Spock and Uhura.

"...apology, Lieutenant," Kirk was saying. "You were right and I was wrong on this one."

"Captain, that's nothing to the apology I owe you. I don't know what got into me; I was just frantic about Tamas. I really am sorry."

"Apology accepted, Uhura," Kirk said. He smiled and reached out his hand. She took it, her answering smile lit the room.

He led her over to the regeneration table. "I think you ought to know, Miss Renarde, that you owe your quick rescue to Lt. Uhura. She was convinced that something was wrong long before there seemed any reason for us to think so."

Tamas reached for Uhura's other hand, and moved her leg, earning a sharp rebuke from the doctor. "Uhura, do you have any sisters?"

Uhura looked puzzled. "Why yes, I have five."

Tamas felt a little flattened. "Oh. Well, I don't care. Could you use another?"

Uhura took her hand from Kirk, and threw her arms carefully around Tamas. "Just what I need! Welcome, sister!"

"Yes, but Tamas could use some rest now," said McCoy, removing her gently. "If you have questions, people, I suggest you ask them now, and let her get some sleep."

"I just came to check on my sister," said Uhura with dignity. "Sleep well, Tamas."

Mr. Spock watched her speculatively as she left. "Captain," he said, "am I to understand that Lieutenant Uhura proceeded on a hunch when she beamed down to search for Tamas?"

"A pretty strong hunch. It caused her to forget her manners." Tamas found herself consumed with curiosity as to what Uhura had said to the captain. Even Spock raised an eyebrow, and the doctor grinned.

"I'd've loved to have seen it, Jim!"

"Doctor, you have overlooked a most important point," Mr. Spock said. "Lieutenant Uhura has always had irreproachable manners. Also she is, for her species, quite logical. What could have caused an intuition so strong as to bring her to forget courtesy and logic?"

"Spock, people — real people, with ordinary red blood and boring, round ears

— do get hunches occasionally. They don't always have reasons for what they do, and once in a while, they come out right anyway."

"Doctor, I am aware of your theory that logical thought is a waste of time in any field but medicine, but please refrain from trying to convert me to it. Captain, I believe it to be necessary that we find out exactly what happened to Tamas during her confinement."

"That, gentlemen," said Kirk, "is what I am about to do, if you will cease your helpful criticism." McCoy and Spock were instantly silent, one looking impatient, the other ostentatiously patient. "Now, Miss Renarde, please tell us everything that was done and said. We'll all sit down here, so you don't have to worry about being long-winded. Just tell everything, in your own words."

Tamas thought she was very long-winded indeed, and by the time her story neared its close, she was very tired as well. "So I lay down. I remember thinking that since I couldn't get away, I ought to get some sleep. It seemed the logical thing to do." She smiled slightly at the shade of approval crossing Spock's face. "I was hurting quite a bit, and couldn't sleep, so," she could feel her cheeks getting hot, and stared straight ahead, past McCoy's shoulder, "I just thought about how awful everything was, and how sorry I was for myself, and had a good cry. That relaxed me enough to sleep."

"Excuse me, Miss Renarde," said Spock, "but I must ask what you were thinking of before you slept."

"Specifically?" Tamas thought back. "Let's see," she said hesitantly, "I was thinking of how horrible the whole thing was, and how much my leg hurt, and how frightened I was. And I was wondering if Uhura would think I had just forgotten to come, or if she'd report me missing. And I was thinking how nice it would be to be with her, sitting comfortably in her quarters, talking about languages, and drinking coffee. Everything calculated to make myself more miserable."

"Telepath, Spock?" said the captain softly.

"Quite possibly, Captain. Miss Renarde, were you ever tested for telepathic abilities?"

"Not that I know of, Mr. Spock. I wasn't on Earth at the ages those tests are usually done, and I suppose my relatives didn't think of it later." She thought for a moment. "I don't think I want to be a telepath."

"Miss Renarde, I assure you that telepathic ability is not a dread disease. It is generally considered an advantage, rather than otherwise, even among Humans."

The doctor gave Spock a disgusted look. "Tamas, even if you are a telepath, it's very unlikely that you'll ever be a 'mind reader.' If you can call out for help when you need it, and make someone hear you, is that so bad? Sounds to me like your abilities are very limited, nothing that'd cause you any trouble."

"Now, I want you two out of here, so she can sleep. Shoo, both of you."

"Goodnight," said Kirk softly. Tamas closed her eyes in gratitude and slept.

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Stepping carefully out of the shower the next morning, Tamas heard the door buzz. She limped over to the intercom. "Yes?"

"It's Jim. May I come in?"

"Come, Jim." She wrapped herself in a long robe and ran a comb through her wet hair, then limped out of the bathroom into her cabin.

Kirk was seated in her chair, drumming his fingers on the desk. "Is this your Peter?"

"Yes, but not the most accurate holo. I keep it because it was the last one I took of him. The color's all wrong — he was much darker than that. A little darker than Uhura. And his shirt was blue, really. But the smile is right." She smiled herself, looking at it. "Doctor McCoy always reminds me of Peter — they came from the same part of the world, you know. A great similarity of accents. But I think Peter was a happier man than the doctor is. He had more talent for happiness." Kirk turned and stared at Tamas, then gave another glance to the holo. He opened his mouth, but Tamas spoke first.

"Before you say another word, Jim, I want you to tell me what Uhura did.

Everything. Now."

"Well." He settled back comfortably. "It was pretty funny, really. I didn't want to go after you, you know." Tamas looked cold at that idea. "You can't go rescuing everyone who misses a lunch date, Tamas. Believe me, they don't thank you for it."

Tamas giggled. Kirk looked as surprised as if Spock had done it. "No, I suppose not."

"Anyway, first Uhura called the ship to see if you had left word for her. Then she beamed up and stormed the bridge. She was quite a sight. She was wearing a long red robe -- she bought it down there, I presume -- and she seemed to take up more room than usual. She was mad, too. What was I going to do, and did I realize that you could be in trouble, and that you didn't have Starfleet training? She wanted me to check the hospital and police department as a first step. I told her she was making a mountain out of a molehill -- well, she was, as far as I could tell. Then she said --" He laughed, stood up, and shook himself and seemed to put on Uhura's expression and stance. Tamas gasped. "She said, 'Well, Captain. I don't know what Tamas may be to you, sir. But to me, she's a friend, sir! And I'm going to find her! Sir!' And she just swooped off the bridge before I could get my mouth closed and answer her! It was really something to see. Uhura usually goes for the politely devastating remark, and I don't remember ever, ever seeing her mad at me before." He sat down. "I wish you could have seen it; you have a real friend there, you know."

Tamas laughed till she had to sit down on the bunk. "I wish the two of you would change places on the bridge someday. I'll bet no one would notice!"

Jim grinned. "I've seen her do me, at a show we had last year. But Chekov would notice, I fear. I haven't got Uhura's legs."

"Don't worry, dear, you own are very nice," said Tamas in a motherly tone.

"Anyway, it must have been while you were down in the cellar that one of your friendly jailers called us on your communicator. You didn't know that, of course. By that time Uhura was wandering the streets of the city armed, having checked at the hospital and the library and learned very little. She couldn't just look for a Terran reading, on the tricorder, you see, because the streets were swarming with Terrans from the Enterprise. but when they called to ask me to use my influence with you--"

"Jim, be serious."

"No, really, they did. they thought I could order you to tell them what they wanted to know, and they thought I might do it, if I knew you were held captive. You never know, I might have tried, if I knew what we were talking about. Hard to negotiate about an unknown quantity. But of course we got a fix on your communicator, and called Uhura. She made a beeline for the building, slammed the door in with her dainty foot, and shooed the Sirathians out as soon as she found out where you were. Then she had you both beamed up. The only improvement would have been if she'd brought the Sirathians with her, but she couldn't really do that on the knowledge we had at the time. We didn't know whether they were secret police for the Emperor, or what."

"I can see that. I can also see that I owe an awful lot to Uhura. It must have been Mama or Papa who called the ship; Junior would have preferred to beat it out of me."

"Beat what out of you?" Jim was totally serious now.

"I don't know!"

"Tamas, we have to find out, for your own safety, for no other reason. And there may be another reason. We won't know that, until we know what's in your head."

"But I don't think there is anything -- stop that, you know what I mean -- anything that could hurt the Emperor. I don't remember anything. I remember him, of course, but not any great secret -- nothing."

"Tamas, there may be a way to find out. Spock has offered to do a mind meld, to look through your childhood memories and see what's there."

Temas drew a breath. "No!. No, I won't do it!"

"But why? I've been through it more than once; it doesn't hurt. And you definitely seem to be in danger."

"Jim, it wouldn't work; I know it wouldn't work. Please don't ask me to do it."

She saw him smile, and could feel him gathering all his resources of charm and persuasiveness. "I am asking you," he said, opening his hands, but not touching her except with eyes and voice. "And Spock has offered. You don't want to offend Spock. You don't dislike him, do you?"

"No, of course not. I barely know him. I just don't want to do a mind meld. It seems like — I don't know — such an invasion."

"It is, in a way. To let someone into your mind requires trust. You do lose your privacy. But I'd rather trust Spock than anyone else I know. Can't you trust him, too?"

She was silent, thinking of the man whom the starship captain trusted. She wondered if Kirk himself knew what a tribute that was.

"Temas, are you sure this is a case in which your personal feelings ought to take precedence over everything — even your safety and your job? The knowledge you acquired as a child, whatever it is, may be relevant to the admission of Sirath to the Federation."

"Jim, you'd charm the hind leg off a donkey! As Peter used to say," she added hastily, seeing his eyebrows rise.

"I wonder just how much you've been seeing of Bones lately. You're starting to sound like him." Turning to the door, he called, "Come, Spock." Temas, still in her robe, gave him a dirty look as Spock entered quietly. "She'll be happy to do a mind meld, Spock. Don't look so skeptical."

"I am only somewhat surprised, Captain, as I had formed the impression that telepathy was distasteful to Miss Renarde."

Damn, Temas thought, why didn't I think of that? A morbid horror of telepathy. But I probably couldn't have carried it off.

"On your head be it, Captain," she said. "I don't think it will work." Kirk stood up, and Temas shifted herself clumsily from the bunk to the chair. Spock stood behind her, but she hardly noticed him. She was trying to arrange her thoughts. Forget about him, she told herself. Forget? When she could feel the heat of his body not ten centimeters behind her? Forget the hands about to touch her, the voice still in her ears, the thighs against the back of her chair? Think about your childhood. She took a couple of deep, calming breaths, and concentrated on Sirath as she had known it twenty years ago. "Ready, Mr. Spock," she said, keeping the Emperor's face in her mind. But in the instant when Mr. Spock's hand came over her shoulder and hovered in front of her face, ready to make contact with the nerves there, she seemed to see every foolish daydream, every silly thought she had had about Spock from his cold and analytic viewpoint, and she despised herself. As his fingers touched her face, she was writhing internally in shame. And at the first touch of his alien mind, something in her gave a twist and a shove, like one of Sulu's martial arts demonstrations, and she was alone in her mind with a headache. Spock's fingers were withdrawn, and she stared at Kirk, who looked startled.

"Miss Renarde has a very strong natural shield," remarked Spock. "In my judgement, damage would occur should I try to break through it. Permission to go to my quarters, Captain."

"Yes, Spock, go. Rest." Kirk looked at Temas, spread his hands, then dropped them, and left.

Temas sighed and slowly continued dressing, made clumsy by her stiff and aching leg. She had almost finished when she got a call from sickbay. "We have a minute or two to spare, Miss Renarde. How 'bout coming down for a check on that leg?" Wearily, she wondered whether the captain had gone straight to Sickbay from her cabin, or had merely called there on his way somewhere else.

Chapter 6

"Well, that's doing nicely. Very good, you must have healthy bones. Just rest a lot, eat plenty of protein and take your calcium, and no rough-housing. In the gym or anywhere else," the doctor said meaningfully.

"Someone did tell me this ship was like a small town for gossip," Tamas laughed. "I see she wasn't exaggerating."

"Now, who can that have been? Not my trusted and highly discreet nurse?"

"Doctor," Tamas heard herself say, "may I talk with you for a few minutes?"

He looked at her sharply. Without a word, he led her through Sickbay to his inner office, and shooed her inside as the door opened. "Counseling session, Chris," he remarked, and stepped in behind. "Now," he said, "the walls are deaf. The bulkheads are soundproof, I have no appointments coming up, and Chris won't disturb us for less than a major emergency. Tell Uncle Leonard your troubles."

Tamas smiled wryly at him, though her forehead was still wrinkled with the pain of the attempted mind meld. She looked around the small, cluttered office, and dropped into the nearest chair, pressing her back into its comfortable contours, managing her stiff leg awkwardly. Absently, she rubbed her hand over the desk at her elbow, which looked like wood but felt like plastic. She looked at McCoy, and he folded himself into the chair opposite hers, leaning back with his hands clasped lightly. He didn't say anything more.

"Yes. I asked to talk to you, so I ought to talk." She thrust her linked hands out in front of her, stretching her back. "I'm so very tired, though. Doctor, how much did Jim tell you about --what happened?"

"Little while ago? In your cabin? Some. Spock tried a mind meld and it didn't work. Now Jim wishes he hadn't talked you into it. Probably blames you a little, too."

"I told him --"

"Sure, it's not your fault. He won't blame you long. It's hard on Spock, that's all. Jim hates for things to be hard on Spock."

"Hard on Spock? I'm the one with the headache." She rubbed her forehead fretfully.

McCoy stared at her. "Funny, you seemed reasonably perceptive. Couldn't you see --"

"I didn't see Spock. The cabin is small -- I sat in the chair and he stood behind me."

"Oh. I've seen failed melds; they are hard on him. His headache will be worse than yours, for one thing. And that's not the worst of it."

"I didn't know. You think they won't want to try again, then?"

"What'd be the use? Besides, you wouldn't do it anyway."

"No, but I'd hate to be nagged about it. I don't think your captain gives up easily."

McCoy smiled, but he seemed serious, too. "Never let Jim talk to you; it's too dangerous. He's the one Persuasion was written about. I've actually seen him talk a Klingon into a truce! You just have to close your eyes and holler when he starts talking. If you listen to him, you're lost. Believe me, I know."

Tamas smiled in agreement. "At any rate, the meld doesn't seem to be of vital importance. It was mostly for my sake that he wanted to do it, though he dressed it up a lot."

"Now don't run away with that idea. It's pretty damn important that we find out why a Federation citizen was kidnapped, and what the Emperor's hiding, if anything. Once this place is in the Federation, it's in, and we have some mighty odd members already. That's why Spock volunteered, you know. I don't think you know what a favor that was. Mind melds aren't comfortable for him, even successful ones. He doesn't like wading through our disorganized, uncontrolled Human emotions."

He sat up and leaned forward. "Look, you came here to tell me something, so

why not spit it out? I'll give you a start —it's either Sirath or the meld, so which is it?"

"The meld," she said, low.

"Well," he said, after a pause, "I'm damned if I'm going to sit in here and play Twenty Questions."

"Dear, sweet, Uncle Leonard, always so patient!" Tamas smiled at him, and his face broke into a sudden grin.

"Patience, dear niece, is not what you need. You need a heavy dose of courage, and you're the one who carries the pill."

"Right. Funny, I don't think of myself as a moral coward, but here I am. Okay, let me talk, and maybe I can get it out. I know a little about the Vulcan mind meld; did some research on it years back. I know why this meld didn't work." McCoy sighed and leaned back in his listening position, watching her face carefully as she spoke.

"I was a fool to try it, but Jim is so persuasive. No, cancel that. I could have told him why it wouldn't work, and he would have given up the whole idea. At least, I assume he would have. But I couldn't bring myself to tell him —cowardice again. I should have just said no and stuck to it; that would have been the honorable thing to have done. Instead, I convinced myself that it might work, that there was a chance I could let Mr. Spock into my childhood memories without admitting him to my current emotional state." Tamas stopped dead, and took a deep breath, twisting in her chair. She leaned forward, elbows on knees, and looked into the doctor's blue eyes, where comprehension was dawning. "Right. I've heard you tease Mr. Spock about how women can't resist his ears."

"You're in love with Spock?" But McCoy sounded incredulous. It couldn't be too obvious, after all, Tamas reflected. That was some solace to her wounded pride.

"Not in love," she said. "I've been in love, and I know the difference. I loved Peter from knowledge. I knew him as well as one person can know another in the time we had, and I loved him happy or sad, loving or furious. In sickness and in health...."

"I hardly know Mr. Spock at all. But I have an all-out adolescent infatuation with him. A crush, for God's sake! Heaven only knows what triggered it. It can be any little thing — the shape of a hand, the length of a leg." She raised her eyebrows and looked mischievous. "The point of an ear. Actually, it didn't bother me until this meld came up. After all, who does it hurt? I don't moon around the bridge, staring at himDo I?" she said quickly.

McCoy seemed to shake himself. "No, not at all. As a matter of fact, you seem the last person....Besides, I thought you and Jim...."

"Jim and I have had some pleasant times." She smiled, remembering. "If the trip were longer, I could see myself falling very hard for him. Lovely shoulders. But you see what I mean. If I were in love with Spock, I wouldn't want to sleep with Jim, would I?"

"Well, now, I don't know about that...."

"I wouldn't. I know. Anyway, a crush like this will only last a couple of months, and while it does, I get some pleasant daydreams and some very pleasant dreams at night. No one is harmed, and I'm walking on air."

"I tell you," she said soberly, "I have felt human on this trip for the first time since Peter died, thanks largely to your captain and first officer. But to have Mr. Spock see all that in mind meld — to have him see himself as I see him — to have him wade through all that foolishness, that he can't possibly understand —" She reached up to cool her cheeks with her hands. McCoy shifted his knees out of the way, leaned forward, and put a hand on her shoulder.

"Okay, now it's out. Feel better? Well, you will. As for the mind meld — I doubt if you could go through with it, even if you decided to Bare All to Mr. Spock."

"I hate the damn things myself," he said suddenly. "Went through it twice and that was enough. A man need his privacy, and so does a woman. I'll tell Jim —"

I'll tell both of them that we know why you can't meld, but it's not something that can be cured in a day. They'll have to find some other way to find out what they want to know. Some Human way.

"Stick to Humans, Tamas. Don't get yourself involved with a Vulcan. I've seen what that does to a Human." He was serious, but he suddenly grinned. "Why, do you know how they express affection? You won't believe this -- here, hold out your hand." He bent her thumb, ring finger and little finger down, leaving her first and second fingers straight. Matching that gesture with his own right hand, he crossed her two extended fingers with his, so the tips touched lightly. "A real thrill, isn't it? This is the universal Vulcan symbol of cross-sex attachment -- for lovers and spouses. Probably cross-sex friends too, if they have friends. Never man to man or woman to woman, though. I don't know why not, since it's about as sexy as a handshake. Fun, huh? Be glad you're Human, Tamas." Tamas couldn't help but smile.

"And now," McCoy said, standing up and edging around her chair to lift her by an elbow, "you go get some sleep and help that leg to heal. I'll ask Chris to give you something for the headache. And don't worry."

"I'm really not worried, except for myself. I don't know anything, so I can't give anything away. But I'm not feeling very eager to go back down to Sirath. What can they think a little child would have known?"

♦♦♦

The next day Tamas was eating a chicken sandwich in the main mess hall, sitting by herself at a small table. Slowly, she began aware of a person standing next to the table with a tray in his hands.

"Jim! I'm sorry,, I didn't see you at all. Sit down, please." He pulled a chair over, and put down a huge hamburger with, as far as Tamas could judge, everything on it including a few things she didn't recognize. "What are those green things, Jim?"

"Pickle plant, we call it, but it has some more exotic name. It has a funny, salty taste -- here, try some."

"Oh, um -- ugh! Must be an acquired taste." She washed the pickle plant down with a gulp of milk, and returned to her sandwich. Kirk took a bite of his hamburger, and chewed silently, staring into the air.

"Jim..."

He swallowed and said, "Yes?"

"I'm sorry about the mind meld. It just didn't work."

"Bones says he knows why, but he wouldn't tell me."

Tamas could feel the unexpressed question in that carefully phrased remark, and took another sip of milk. "Patient confidentiality, I suppose," she said, and saw him sag back a little in his chair. He had taken no for an answer, anyway. They finished in silence. As Tamas was about to leave, Kirk roused himself.

"Wait. Please stay. Pickle plant isn't the only acquired taste around here." He raised his voice very slightly. "Spock, come over here, will you?"

Tamas hadn't seen Spock at all, but she looked around and finally spotted him at the other side of the room near the synthesizers. He had a tray, and was making his way through the tables to them. Kirk lowered his voice. "Spock is my friend. If he were yours, you might find the whole thing much easier."

Tamas tried to keep up a front of calm friendliness, as Spock took a chair from another table and made a crowded three at hers. "Hello, Mr. Spock. I think that an apology may be in order. Doctor McCoy informs me that a failed mind meld is not very comfortable for you."

"No apology is necessary, Miss Renarde, as no offense was given. The mind meld is more difficult for some than for others. However, in Doctor McCoy's pharmacopoeia are drugs that would certainly sedate you enough to make a meld possible, should it become absolutely necessary."

"No, Spock," said Kirk, "I would not allow that under any foreseeable circumstances." He turned to Tamas. "What Mr. Spock has not mentioned is that it would be a nightmare of sorts for him to be lost in a drugged mind. You don't have

to be heroic about submitting to sedation, because I certainly will not permit it."

Temas sighed with relief. "I'm very glad, Captain. It really would be heroic on my part, and I've no desire at all to be a hero. That's a very uncomfortable line of work, so I hear."

Kirk rose with his tray. "No, you stay here. I'll bring you some dessert." He left them for a minute and a half, during which time Spock ate steadily of his salad and Temas sat in uncomfortable silence, looking out over the room. When Kirk returned, he had a small dish of sherbet with a fortune cookie on it. He set it down in front of her, and strolled out.

Curiously, Temas broke the cookie and pulled out the strip of paper inside. "He will talk if you encourage him," she read, and laughed despite herself. Spock raised an eyebrow in her direction and something inside her seemed to rise to meet it, but she quelled it firmly.

"Mr. Spock, look at this." She held out the paper. He read it, and lifted the other eyebrow, too. "Is the captain always so fanciful, Mr. Spock? I think this is by way of being an ice-breaker. He thinks I should get to know you better, in the hope of making a mind meld easier."

"Logical," remarked Spock. "Mind meld is a singularly intimate experience, and whereas that experience may be simple and even pleasant between friends, it is never easy and often impossible between antagonists."

"But I'm not your antagonist, Mr. Spock."

"I did not mean to imply that you were, but we are not by any means well-acquainted, and you may unconsciously feel that mind contact is an intrusion when practiced by a comparative stranger. It is not an uncommon situation. On Vulcan, of course, mind meld is rarely used between strangers, and never involves an untrained mind. It is only when we come into contact with other races that such situations arise."

"But, Mr. Spock, isn't that very unpleasant for you, too? Would it make any difference to you if I knew you better? Would it make it better -- or worse?"

"That question is irrelevant, Miss Renarde, as the captain has decided that we are to become better acquainted. The captain's will, as you surely know, is law." He sipped his juice, and she looked at his eyes uncertainly. Did Vulcans joke?

"I believe you mean that."

"It is quite true. The relevant statutes--"

"No, Mr. Spock, don't tell me the numbers; I should instantly forget them. I know that the captain's word is legally law, but I had imagined a certain relaxed attitude towards that law in a modern space vehicle."

"I assure you, Miss Renarde, that the discussions you may hear and even take part in are not evidence that the captain takes his responsibilities lightly."

"Not his responsibilities -- his privileges. We were talking about giving orders."

"Giving orders is a responsibility. Also, making sure they are carried out is a responsibility. The entire crew must retain the habit of instant obedience." Temas was slightly shocked, and he seemed to read her face well. "Obedience to Captain Kirk's orders has time and again saved this ship and everyone aboard her. He would be derelict in his duty if he allowed us to be derelict in ours."

"Is he good at his job, Mr. Spock?" Temas suddenly wanted to know.

"In my opinion, outstanding. He is logical, intuitive, ingenious, and gifted with an extraordinary ability to command the loyalty and obedience of his crew."

"Certainly loyalty."

"Miss Renarde, his record is on the computer for you to see. I do not form my opinions without logical bases."

Temas felt a desire to change the subject. She tucked this picture of Kirk away in her mind to compare with the Kirk she knew. "Well, pursuant to the captain's expressed wish that we become better acquainted, will you come show me what keys to push or words to use to get the popular library? I seem to be plugged into the historical and technical ones only -- plenty of engineering journals, but no Jane Austen."

Temas soon found herself suggested as a helper in all of Spock's work. Jobs that could be done more quickly and efficiently by any yeoman on the ship were done by Temas. She found Spock sitting next to her at meals, and any question she asked the captain was referred to Spock. "Spock, help Miss Renarde with that, will you?"

Temas thought it funny, and a bit annoying. It was probably even more annoying for Mr. Spock. She was sure he would rather work alone than have such a clumsy helper in his deft and accurate scientific observations. She suspected him of secretly redoing all her work while she slept.

But in one way, the arrangement worked. Temas no longer felt uncomfortable around Spock. She quickly gave up trying to impress him or even to hold her own in science, but came to enjoy more generalized discussions of logic or human psychology, subjects on which he had a unique slant.

Temas found herself asking him about telepathy. It seemed strange to do so, when she had so bluntly rejected his offer of mind meld; but he was the ship's only telepath, and her curiosity drove her to question him.

"But what is it like, Mr. Spock? What does it feel like to be in someone else's mind?"

"It varies with the mind, Miss Renarde," he said patiently. "Telepathy is highly subjective. To experience the thoughts of another is always fascinating, but the thoughts themselves may be most distasteful."

"Like Human ones."

"Not always. You forget that I am half Human."

"I thought you wanted to forget it."

"Miss Renarde, it would be supremely illogical for me to forget my Human half. I must remember it, if only to govern it. Please hand me that capsule."

And another time:

"Is there no way to describe the telepathic experience, Mr. Spock?"

"There are no words in Standard, at least."

"In Vulcan?"

"In Vulcan, yes. There are words, but they are few and almost totally inadequate. At any rate, words are reminders of what we already know -- we cannot describe the wholly unknown. If you ever learn conscious telepathy, you will be able to understand the words."

"But then I won't need them!"

"True."

"That's what similes and metaphors are for, Mr. Spock. To describe the unknown."

"I know that Humans are much prone to figures of speech -- understanding them has caused me no little difficulty in my work with Humans."

"Your mind doesn't work that way."

"Apparently not."

And again:

"Are you a strong telepath, Mr. Spock?"

"Fairly strong, for a Vulcan. Vulcans are not among the most telepathic species we have met. They are touch telepaths almost exclusively. We have met species who can project and read thoughts far across space. And we had one Earth passenger who had been to Vulcan to learn to shut out the noise of other minds."

Temas shuttered. "Horrible."

"Miss Renarde, why do you ask so many questions about telepathy?"

"Curiosity only, Mr. Spock. I find it -- fascinating."

Chapter 7

"I see that Jim's got you following Spock around like a lost puppy," said Doctor McCoy, as they walked down a corridor together. "D'you think that's the best cure for your condition?"

Temas sighed and smiled. "Probably not, Doctor — although I do have my hopes. Sometimes getting to know someone well will kill the interest; I'm sure you know how that can be."

The doctor appeared to reflect, perhaps to recall. "Yes," he admitted reluctantly. "I've known it to happen. But Spock is different."

"You really do like him a lot, don't you?" Temas stood still for an instant, and grinned at McCoy, who slowly developed an answering grin. Then he abruptly started walking again.

"That green-blooded, egotistical computer? I'm used to him, is all. Like ringworm, he kind of grows on you."

"Right, Doctor." Temas sobered suddenly. "He does, doesn't he?"

"Look, Temas, you want me to tell Jim the problem? Or at least, tell him that this enforced intimacy isn't working?"

"N-no, I'd tell him myself, if I wanted him told, but I don't think I do. For one thing, I have faith in your captain's resourcefulness. You said he could find some Human way to find out what I know that's so important. Maybe we won't need a meld at all. And for another thing, Jim may be right. I am more comfortable with Mr. Spock, now. Maybe by getting to know him, I'll be able to meld more easily."

He turned to stare at her, and she had the grace to drop her eyes. "Well, maybe not. But Doctor — I'm enjoying every minute of it. Almost. I like to be with him. What harm can it do?"

"You don't want an answer to that." They walked on in silence, until Temas found something to say.

"Doctor, I haven't even asked how your problem is going. Have you isolated the virus or whatever it is yet?"

"Yet! I'm beginning to think it will be never! I've tried every test known to find the thing, and it's totally unfindable. There's got to be something that's making these people sick, but I haven't found anything in the Azamet tissue, or in the Sirathians I've tested. I've looked for correlations between the two, and there are so many it's going to take a month of Sundays just to eliminate the unimportant ones."

"You sound a bit discouraged."

"Discouraged? Why should I be discouraged? This is my idea of a treat— hunting a virus that probably isn't there, because it might cause a disease that probably isn't important anyhow! That's how I always like to spend my time. Ask anyone!"

Temas laughed. "I have total faith in you, Doctor," she said, clapping him on the back in a cheerful fashion, calculated to infuriate. He snorted and turned in at Sickbay.

♦♦♦

The next day Temas was on her way to Main Rec for a chess lesson when Spock, who was her teacher, overtook her.

"I am afraid, Miss Renarde, that your chess lesson will have to be postponed. Doctor McCoy has become ill, and the captain has asked me to assist in Sickbay."

"You? He — what kind of help — wait." She gathered herself together, and realized what the important question was. "Just how sick is Doctor McCoy?"

"Miss Renarde, he is dying."

She thought, I've been in this play before, and I didn't like it then. "What is wrong with him, Mr. Spock?" she asked, very quietly and gently.

"He is dying of the illness he came to investigate, which is the plague that decimated Azamet."

"But Terrans aren't supposed to catch that," said Temas. "Are you sure? I'm sorry, Mr. Spock," she added hastily, "that was a foolish question."

"Doctor McCoy succeeded in isolating the virus shortly before his collapse. It affects the human brain in peculiar ways, leading to vertigo, increased cerebral activity, and finally coma. His research was actually much facilitated by the illness, in that the increase in cerebral activity seems to have functioned to augment his normal intelligence."



"There's something horrible about that."

"Not at all." Spock looked rather surprised. "The isolation of the virus is the first step toward a cure. Nurse Chapel is working on that now, and I am about to join her. The doctor's condition appears stable for the moment, but we do not know how long he can live. Also, we have been expecting the other members of the medical team to develop the illness, but so far they are all well." He passed and strode down the corridor in the direction of Sickbay. Tamas leaned back against the bulkhead and pressed her fingers into a seam, hard. When she looked at her fingers, they had long ridges pressed into them. Still staring at her fingers, she called quietly, "Mr. Spock!"

He heard her, though he was well around the bend of the corridor. He was back in a moment, his face betraying none of the impatience she was sure he must feel. He waited for her to speak.

"Didn't you say the ship from Azamet came to Earth about a year and a half ago?"

"One point six four years, to be precise."

"Mr. Spock, I think that virus is what killed my husband."

Mr. Spock's eyebrow rose. "Indeed. Come with me." His stride was unmatchable; Tamas found herself running alongside him to Sickbay, where Chapel was seated at a computer console. Doctor McCoy, looking strangely young and helpless, was curled on a monitorbed. Tamas felt a twist in her chest when she saw him-- he had the same look that Peter had worn, those days in the hospital. Spock did not even glance at the bed, but went straight to Chapel.

"Miss Chapel, Miss Renarde believes she has recognized the doctor's illness as the one that caused her husband's death. I will take over here, if you will interview her for medical data." He slid into the computer chair as Chapel slid out of it, holding out her hands to Tamas with a glad smile.

"Maybe you can help us, Tamas! Oh, but this must be hard on you." Comprehension came over her face. "Come, sit down and have a cup of coffee. And get your breath, too," she added. "Did you run here all the way from your cabin?"

"Mr. Spock walks rather fast," Tamas panted, dropped into a chair and gratefully accepting the hot cup. "Thank you so much. It is rather hard, I'm afraid. I thought, on this trip, I'd finally gotten over Peter's death. But Doctor McCoy looks so much like him right now-- and he always sounded like him--" She gave up trying to talk, and looked helplessly around for a place to put the coffee. Quickly Christine took the cup, leaving Tamas' hands free to cover her streaming eyes. In a moment, she raised her head. "Pay no attention, Chris. Just ask anything you want. It won't hurt me to cry or you to watch, after all."

"Right. And we may be in a hurry. We don't know how long we have. Could you tell me first what makes you think it's the same disease? "We've been so sure Terrans were immune. I suppose," she said thoughtfully, "your husband was Terran?"

"Through and through. He was a farm boy from North America. We met at college, and I think part of what we liked about each other was the difference in backgrounds. He liked me to talk about other worlds, and I liked him to talk about pigs. His life had been so stable-- his parents grew up in the same town! Whereas mine-- my mother was from Europe and my father was from Australia, and I spent most of my childhood off Earth. All right, yes, I'm coming to it. Peter was working at the Mboro spaceport --it's not big for tourists; you've probably never heard of it, but it has excellent transporter, land, and sea shipping facilities. There was a price war going on, and Mboro's prices were the lowest at the time. They were getting a lot of business. Peter or someone from his department had to be there to greet the shippers when they beamed down. They would want to check on their cargo, you know, or give their crew shore leave, or something. Usually it was Peter who met them; he was the boss, and he never got over being interested in aliens. No matter how ... how alien they acted, or looked, or smelled, he loved to see them. And they could tell, somehow, through translators and strange body language and all. They would come back." She smiled, remembering. "He would have made a wonderful ambassador, but he always said, why change a good thing. And I could

work anywhere; in fact, Earth is probably best for a popular historian writing in Standard. We were very happy for five years, and were just starting to think of children when he got sick.

"He woke in the morning looking gray, and he said he felt a little dizzy. He even transported to work instead of walking. He came home at lunchtime, hardly able to stand, but full of ideas. He worked all afternoon on a plan for a spaceport renovation that was unlike any I'd ever seen before -- very creative and extremely practical. I gave it to the trustees after he died, but it's still in committee. But it's good, Chris, not a sick man's wild scheme. In ten years all the old ones will be obsolete. He said he felt as if he'd been asleep all his life, and now he was really awake for the first time. That night, he went to bed early, and kissed me and said, "I love you, Tamas," and the next morning he didn't wake up. They tried everything at the hospital, but he died...."

Christine put her hand over Tamas'. After a moment, she said, "And how long ago was this, Tamas?"

"Tamas took a deep breath and looked up. "It was just about when Mr. Spock says the Azametine ship came to Earth. He died on January the 21st, Terran."

"But no one else."

"Could it be that only a few are vulnerable? Something in their genes or their blood chemistry? Or maybe it isn't the same thing at all, Chris, but it certainly sounds the same."

"Mr. Spock," said Christine. Tamas had forgotten he was in the room. He turned half around in his chair.

"Yes, Miss Chapel."

"Would you please call up Doctor McCoy's rough notes on the work he was doing just before his collapse?" Silently, Mr. Spock complied, and the screen lit with a picture of something multicolored, fuzzy on the outside and complicated within. McCoy's voice came from the speaker.

"I've got it! This is the one! Chris, come and see this! Damn it, how could I have slept all my life and only woken up now?" Spock flipped it off.

"I believe that is the part you wished to hear? I would say the probability is very great that Doctor McCoy's illness is the same as that which killed Tamas' husband.

•••

That was the beginning of a day of intensive interviews. Tamas was asked for every detail about her husband that she could recall: from his place of birth; through childhood diseases, blood type, body build, family history; to exercise quota, coloring, stress rating, and personality. Never had she recalled Peter in such detail, and never to anyone less interested in him. Christine Chapel and Spock worked together, Chapel asking most of the questions and Spock entering the answers in the computer and searching for correlations with the very complete medical records on Dr. McCoy. There were some questions she was unable to answer, and though Chapel was patient and Spock impassive, Tamas grew frustrated and annoyed with herself for not knowing what she surely ought to know. As the day wore on and her fatigue increased, she found herself wondering how much she could have loved her husband, if she couldn't even remember his blood pressure.

And a couple of times, when, in answer to Chapel's questions, Tamas had sketched a rough portrait of some part of Peter's essential Peterness, so that she almost thought she had brought him to life for them, Spock broke in with a question about the shape of Peter's fingernails or the condition of his skin. Tamas gripped the arms of her chair and forced down her fury to answer coolly.

When finally they had wrung her dry, they let her go. She left them, one bent over her patient, the other over his computer, and wandered through the ship. The chapel was in use by some group. She stood in the back for a few minutes, and listened to the minor-key chanting of the leader. Then she wandered out again. She dreaded the solitude of her quarters, yet hated the idea of meeting someone and having to talk. After a while, she found herself at the observation deck and went in to stand at the rail and stare at the stars. Sirath was at the bottom of the

huge port. Above the planet hung constellations she'd seen in her childhood, but brighter, stars of blue and yellow and white. She held the rail and took a deep, slow, breath. Peter, she thought, where are you? No one here knows you at all. She stared for a long time, at all those blazing indifferences, all those places that had never known Peter. And slowly the stars helped her to forget fatigue, frustration, and anger and return to something approaching calm, and to a normal state of worry over Doctor McCoy.

People were scattered around the area in ones or twos, silent or talking in low voices. She became aware of someone on her right, and by the starlight she was sure that it was the captain.

"Hello, Jim, how long have you been there?"

"Almost as long as you have. I saw you come in. Are you all right?"

"Yes. Yes I am. And there's a possibility for the doctor, Jim."

"I know; Spock told me." When, Tamas wondered, how? "If they find anything useful, they'll let us know right away."

"And if they don't? Do they go back to trying this and trying that?"

"Tamas, that's why I wanted to talk to you. It's possible -- not likely, but possible -- that they will find you don't consciously have the information they need."

"Consciously."

"Consciously. Tamas, I won't order you to undergo a mind meld under the influence of drugs."

"You couldn't, could you? I'm not Starfleet."

"Check regulations. I have pretty broad authority aboard this ship, you know."

Tamas smiled slightly. "You don't look like Captain Bligh."

"Little do you know." He smiled back, then turned serious again. "As I said, I won't order you. Or Spock. But he will offer, if the necessity arises."

"You're sure of that, aren't you?"

"Very sure. You're avoiding the issue. If a meld could help Bones, would you try it?"

"With drugs, you mean."

"With drugs."

"I can't tell you how much I hate that idea, Jim."

"How much do you hate having Bones die without trying all you could to save him?"

"He told me not to listen to you. Okay, Jim, you're right. I couldn't let him die, and even if I could -- damn, damn, damn. I will if I have to, Jim. Walk me to my cabin, if you don't have to be somewhere else? She looked back at the stars as they left. They burned so brightly, with no rage or fear-- sometimes the Vulcan way did seem best.

•••

Tamas spent the next morning on historical research. Word of the doctor's sickness had spread throughout the ship. Everyone was aboard; no more Humans were allowed to beam down. No one else showed any sign of contracting the disease. Sickbay was off limits to well-wishers. The time passed slowly. Finally, Tamas blanked her screen, and left her cabin to wander aimlessly around the ship. Others seemed to have the same idea. Main Rec held a few chess or card players, but no noisy groups. The corridors held not only the usual purposeful traffic, but a number of loiterers. She loitered herself, for a while, exchanging lack of information with a few yeomen. The plants in the botany area soothed her restlessness only slightly. Observation deck was fairly crowded, with people moving in and out. The officers on the bridge were watchful, and the science station was empty. Kirk gave her a preoccupied smile. Uhura smiled more warmly, but not happily. Tamas poured a cup of coffee at the mess hall and took it back to her cabin. She was beginning to hate that cabin. When the communications link beeped, she jumped.

"Yes?"

"Miss Renarde, this is Spock. Will you please come to Sickbay."

"Coming, Mr. Spock." Tamas had no breath for any whys. She ran to the lift.

Chapter 8

Her attention went first to the bed, but the doctor looked no different. Neither did Spock, who had certainly been in there at least twenty-four hours. His hair was as smooth, his face as calm, his eyes as bright as they always were. Chapel looked exhausted; Tamas knew that her own wretched night's sleep showed on her face; but Spock might have been a mannequin, so little did the strain show on him. The first thing Tamas said was, "Go get some sleep, Chris."

Spock seemed to look at Chapel for the first time. "Miss Chapel, you are in need of rest. Go. You can do no more here until I have found out more about Miss Renarde's husband and his death." Chapel looked around vaguely, seemed about to disagree, nodded, and left.

Tamas turned to face Spock. "You want to try drugs," she said. His silence was asset. "I want to talk to you first, in Doctor McCoy's office." She didn't wait for an answer, but walked into the office and blacked the windows. She sat down in the chair from which she had talked to the doctor. Spock stood at the door, hands behind his back. "Sit down, Mr. Spock, if you please. I have a question to ask you. Or perhaps, an answer to give you." When he was seated opposite her, she continued, "I know why the mind meld didn't work, Mr. Spock. I was trying to conceal something from you — something of immediate concern to me. If you use the drugs, you'll find it out anyway, I presume?"

"Very probably."

"But if I tell you, now, before melding, then I wouldn't have anything left to hide. And then the meld ought to work on its own, without drugs. Is that right?"

"Not necessarily, Miss Renarde. There are other variables in a mind meld which you have not considered."

"But possibly?"

"Possibly."

"Then I ought to tell you, because if I don't, we'll need the drugs and you'll find out anyway; but if I do, we may be able to find everything we need without them."

"It would seem logical."

Tamas could feel herself reddening. She stared at her hands in her lap. "Mr. Spock, Human emotions are forever in the way. I have been afflicted with an infatuation for you." She looked up and thought his ears were a trifle green.

"It isn't anything I could prevent, Mr. Spock, even if I had wanted to. I wasn't hurting anyone." Horrified, she heard herself begin to plead, almost whining. She straightened her shoulders. "That's nonsense. I gave in to a pleasurable emotion, that's all that happened. And instead of refusing the mind meld altogether, I took the very dishonest step of agreeing to it, although I was determined that you should never know."

"And also, I let the captain throw us together at every possible opportunity, although I knew that would only make the difficulty worse. I have been thoroughly underhanded, and I deserve whatever comes of my deception." She stopped abruptly.

"You did not wish me to see this emotion — this infatuation — although you would have permitted me to see your other feelings?" Tamas nodded. "Then, why is this one so much worse than the others?"

"It's not worse, exactly, but it's more childish. Sillier. And it's one that involves you. I knew it would be very unpleasant for you. Also," she paused a moment to gather her courage. "I thought — think — I think it will make you despise me, and I couldn't stand that."

"I believe I am unlikely to despise you, Miss Renarde, but I fail to comprehend why the thought is less distasteful to you now than it was previously."

She raised her chin. "It is no less distasteful. It is -- necessary."

Besides, Mr. Spock, an appropriate punishment for dishonesty is that I should be compelled to be more honest than words alone allow."

"Your honesty at this moment is admirable. I have known few Humans so accurate, either to others or to themselves." He had been leaning forward, forearms on knees, hands together. Now he straightened and looked steadily at Tamas, seeming to weigh her with his eyes.

"Let us attempt the mind meld." Tamas felt a jolt in her stomach, as her body realized what her mind had permitted. She stared at Spock in sudden terror.

"Please be assured that I will make this as bearable as I can," he said. Resolutely, Tamas suppressed her fear, more afraid of what the fear would do to the mind meld than she was of the meld itself. She leaned forward. Spock's long fingers reached out, hovered just above the surface of her face, then pressed lightly but firmly. She felt warm, almost hot. As he leaned toward her from his chair, she could feel heat radiating from his thin body. She had closed her eyes as his hand came near, but now she opened them and looked out past a lattice of fingers at the dry lips and shaded eyes opposite her. He was looking at nothing, seeming more to listen for a faint sound. She closed her eyes again.

//I remember,, she thought. Vulcan body temperature is higher than ours. About forty, I think.//

//Forty point five three two,// said Spock in her head.

And just that easily, with no tearing of the mind, no deep breathing exercises, they were linked.

//Hello, Mr. Spock,// she said politely, with a mild-smile. //Welcome.//

//Do you mean that, Miss Renarde?//

//I don't know, but I'll try. This kind of 'talking' seems easy, but I presume it isn't enough?//

//No, Miss Renarde. If we are to find memories forgotten by your conscious mind we must dig deeper, which will not be easy, possibly quite difficult.//

//For whom, Mr. Spock?//

//For both of us, Miss Renarde.//

//Well, then, I will make it as bearable as I can.// The first time they had tried to mind meld, she had been trying to make it easy on herself, to cover up what she wanted hidden. Now she saw that she might as well try to make love in a body cast. She sighed, both physically and mentally, relaxed, and opened to Spock. She felt him dive beneath the polite words to reach a level full of feelings. She forgot abruptly about what he might be seeing, wrapped in her intense interest in what she saw of him. There was a curiosity as wide-ranging as a kitten's, but disciplined and persistent. Her brain brought up the memory of a swordsman she had seen in an old movie, darting in and out with his blade, laughing as he fought. It was Mr. Spock, stabbing at facts, and laughing as he impaled them. She felt a surge of well-controlled amusement. Not hers. Spock had seen the picture in her mind. Well, she was past embarrassment now; she shared his smile. She felt courage gathering -- his? or hers? -- and he reached for the deeper emotions, knowing what he would find. There was himself as she saw him. There was a wave of longing, and a swell of happiness to have known him at all. There were juvenile fixations on various bits of him -- infatuation with his eyebrows, adoration of the way he steepled his hands in thought. Curiosity. She could feel his businesslike noting along the way as he strove to get through to yet lower levels, and his compassion. She found that she did still have some capacity for embarrassment, but she put it aside as best she could in an effort to help him get quickly through that area. She "heard" his voice.

//Slow. Slow. We have all the time there is.//

His was a voice of infinite patience, and accompanied by a sense of time overflowing, a great richness of time. She wondered if Vulcan felt like that, and instantly she saw red desert and harsh mountains, and circling birds, far away yet sharp and clear. She caught the separate and distinct scents of a host of plants she had no names for, but would recognize again. She heard distant low sounds: bird calls, scurrying of small animals underground. And she felt, beneath it all,

the hum of many minds working in peace and logic. This was Vulcan, remembered by Spock, lost to him for most of his days, and tasting of him and his homesickness.

Temas kept the Vulcan peace with her as they went beneath her current state, down to the area of memory and deep emotions. As he rippled through, her memories triggered his, and she found herself knowing Spock as she had known no one else, not even Peter, and knowing others through him. The Kirk she knew was courteous or eager or lazy and happy and a little smug, the pictures colored by her deep affection and gratitude. His Kirk was a hundred Kirks, most of whom she had never seen — angry, joyous, ashamed, or triumphant. She saw Spock's complete loyalty, and his bewilderment at Jim and at his own feelings. Temas, too, was surprised at their strength. She began to realize that she had seen the captain in only the most minor of his roles. Sulu, Uhura, Christine — the whole list of people she knew on the Enterprise passed by, and she saw each one filtered through Spock's cool, analytical mind, judged accurately but with mercy. The people she knew as casual acquaintances or good friends were something else, too — valiant fighters, lovers of peace, a superbly functional team. Temas had not, she knew now, seen the ship at peak performance.

//Fortunately,// Spock reminded her dryly. The best in man and ship was brought out by the worst in circumstances.

She had a quick sight of McCoy, and the closest thing in Spock's tidy brain to chaos. Loyalty, yes. Respect, tinged by what should have been, to Spock's mind, contempt, but wasn't. Irritation, and annoyance that there should be irritation. Frustration. And underneath everything else, friendship, buried as far as it could be. And fear. Spock was afraid for McCoy.

He seemed to allow her these glimpses, although she was not sure he could have prevented her. But he didn't seem to try to shield his thoughts, as she had felt him trying to shield, or at least damp down, his reactions to her top-level emotions. Now, with some hesitation, he moved them back to the time before she had boarded the Enterprise. The captain of the Kiang-Kwan, which had brought her to meet the Enterprise. Then aunts and uncles and in-laws by the dozen. Then Peter. Peter dying. But Temas wrenched control away, and hurried back to show Peter alive and well, Peter's laugh, the love they'd had for each other, the plans they'd made. Family Christmases, long walks, quarrels and forgiveness. She could feel Spock noting and docketing a way of life that he had never experienced. She had talked of Peter for hours to Spock and Chris and had never communicated anything of who he was. She had talked of him to her relatives, and had communicated little. They had their own images of Peter; there was no room for hers. But now Temas found the last wounds of his death healed as Spock saw and received Peter as Temas knew him.

//This is who he was!//

//I see, and understand.//

Then Spock gently led her to the crucial place, and they saw Peter coming home sick, the pale, almost gray look of his skin. His eureka experience over the spaceport plans. The way he tried to walk, and could hardly manage. The next day, the ambulance, the way he lay on the stretcher, the feel of his skin, the scent of his breath. Spock seemed to draw from her every detail, whether she'd noticed it at the time or not. The medical chart she'd called up every day at the hospital, which had never told her anything worth knowing; it might as well have said 'worse' and been done with it. But she had read every word, and now through her Spock was reading it, from birth trauma to final symptoms. It was safely in Spock's mind. Now she and he lived the death of her husband. They sat beside his bed, watched his monitors, shared remembered disbelief. Peter died. Spock felt Temas' pain. But that was a pain she wouldn't wish on anyone, and she struggled to keep it from him. She felt the meld begin to fragment; then his more disciplined mind took over entirely, steadying their link.

//I am not that fragile, Miss Renarde,// he said. She sighed.

//Spock, we are inside my head. My name is Temas.//

Then they were moving back through her girlhood. Boys, crushes, studies. Back. Bicycles, dolls, balls. Back, and they were on Sirath, her parents gone.

Nottrue, nottrue, nottrue.... Something broke through the nottrues and found TRUE. The eleven-year-old child who had built up the nottrues and forgotten the nightmare was back, but she was not strong enough to keep out the Vulcan mind as it cut through like a scalpel to the fire that killed her parents and past, back through five years to her arrival on Sirath. She lived through memories she had long forgotten, played with children and nurses, learned the language. She could feel Spock with her, looking out through her childhood eyes, seeing the city with its low pink buildings that bulged as if they'd swallowed their rooms and furniture, absorbing her feel for the people and language. His attention deepened as they saw the Emperor, felt his great kindness, toured the palace with him (the child Tamas had quickly become lost in the rambling place, with rooms opening off rooms, but Spock seemed to know exactly where they were). They played games with the Emperor which, they both saw, he often let her win. For an instant, they were back on Vulcan, where a small Spock was losing once again to his father, who would not insult his logic by purposeful error. Tamas would have liked to have stayed; she found his childhood much more interesting than her own. But on they went, recording in Spock's mind every look, every word of the Emperor's. As they entered Tamas' last year on Sirath, she began to stiffen. Soon they were back at the night of the fire.

Her child self didn't like it any better this time, and she felt Spock's distaste for hurting her. Which was the she who trembled -- the adult or the child?

Her parents were talking to the Emperor. Tamas said goodnight and went home. The ambassador's residence was next door to the imperial palace. Sirath was not the kind of place where show or display demands extensive grounds. She strolled across the small park, picking out the tiny moons in the sky. She slipped in and changed, then fell into bed. She listened to the sounds of the city through her ventilator -- small insect noises mostly, with an occasional passer-by. The city was an unusually peaceful place, but Tamas didn't know that. By this age, she had forgotten most of her life before Sirath.

The next thing she remembered was being lifted up by strong arms that didn't feel familiar. Not her mother or her father. She couldn't see, her eyes hurt, she was coughing. Smoke. Heat. Then she was outside, being held by a young man who was coughing, too. She breathed the night air thankfully. Someone ran up. The man who had been carrying her spoke. "I have the child, Father."

"I will take her. Get inside the palace, quickly." Tamas looked up through streaming eyes, and saw the Emperor. She looked at the younger man, who was turning to go, and saw -- the Emperor! Some sort of noise came out of her mouth, and he looked down and smiled at her, then vanished toward the palace. She looked at the other Emperor.

"He's you," she said. "How can he be you?"

The adult Tamas was almost unbelieving. Could this be something she'd made up -- a story or a dream?

//Unlikely,// said Spock. //It feels like truth, does it not?// They went on. Tamas was put to bed in the palace, but got up every time a servant came in. Her parents were nowhere to be found. It was almost morning before the Emperor returned to tell her they had been killed. At that, she felt herself sinking deep into black misery and a sense of betrayal.

//Tamas, come.// Spock's arm lifted her up, his mind led her out. She found herself -- her adult self -- crying for the child and for her parents. She felt a different pain, the pain of someone who has hurt another, and gradually she came to be able to separate that pain from her own and realize that it was Spock's. As he comforted her, she tried to comfort him.

//I'm all right, Spock. It was probably good for me; things that hurt usually are.// She laughed shakily in her mind.

//Tamas, that is an illogical deduction from a few--// began Spock, but he was cut off by her laughter.

//Oh, Spock, how I love you!// Too late to take it back; the love she felt had spilled over him, and needed no mindwords to confirm it. Tamas knew Spock now,

as she had known no one else in her life. She knew how he loved those he loved, and what it felt like to be in his body walking on his world. And how could she do other than love this man, who had acquired through years of patient effort such a precarious balance between his two inheritances? She felt as if no one could know him and not love him.

He pulled in, braced. Then she felt his sorrow and compassion.

//Spock, you idiot, for heaven's sake, don't be sorry for me!// She flooded him with her happiness, her joy that there should be such a thing as a Spock in the universe. She rejoiced in him as in a mountain, or a star, purely and unpossessively. He caught her joy, and she caught his astonishment, and suddenly his fingers lifted from her face. She opened her eyes, and found him smiling at her, a smile that expressed all the happiness she was feeling. The strange thing, she thought later, was that the smile didn't look strange. It seemed to fit, and he looked momentarily like a man meant for happiness. Tamas realized that her own smile matched his, as the tear tracks she felt on her face matched those on his. In the time it takes to blink, the Vulcan face was back, with a shade of puzzlement. Tamas remembered the doctor, and shook herself out of the remnants of the meld. But for a moment, she looked him in the eyes, long enough to ask, "Do you see, Spock?"

"I see," he replied, "but I do not understand." His voice was low and exhausted. She saw that his skin was white, and felt herself drenched in perspiration. When she sat up, her back was stiff and cramped.

"How long has it been? What time is it?"

The computer answered complacently. "The time is now 18:56." The meld had taken less than ninety minutes.

"I must apologize for the necessity of this mind meld," said Spock, steeping his hands and looking down at them.

"You must not, Spock. Even if we hadn't learned anything --" She waited until he looked up at her. "Even if we hadn't, I would still be very glad to have experienced -- that." His eyes stared steadily into hers, until she dropped her gaze. But then she looked up with new courage. "And for a moment, Spock, you did understand."

"Perhaps I did." He rose, and in the cramped office, she stayed seated so as not to touch him.

"And we did learn something, didn't we? Didn't we?"

"Affirmative. We learned what the knowledge is that caused you to be abducted. Undoubtedly, the Emperor is not immortal, but a clone of a previous ruler." She made an impatient, dismissive gesture. "As for Doctor McCoy, we cannot know whether your memories will be of any use until we compare them with the doctor's medical records. I am about to do that, Miss Renarde." She restrained herself from asking him to rest. She restrained herself from touching his hand. He stepped out of the office and stood back for her to go first. Tamas, one mass of self-restraint, stepped carefully out in front of him, and turned around.

"Call me if there's any news, please, Spock. I want to know." He nodded gravely. Before she was out of Sickbay, he was seated at a computer console, playing it like a familiar instrument.

Chapter 9

Showered and changed, Tamas headed for the mess hall and put together a reassurance meal -- toast, hot chocolate, an egg. She was picking half-heartedly at her food when she saw Kirk and Uhura bearing down on her from different directions. She managed a tired smile, and set her fork down, glad for the company. "It worked, Jim. And without the drugs. He told you he was going to try, didn't he?"

"Yes, of course. Where is he."

"Still in Sickbay, I believe, trying to get some correlations out of the computer."

Kirk didn't sit, but swallowed a glass of milk in one gulp, then grabbed a slice of pizza. "Excuse me, ladies," he said, and was gone, dumping his tray on the way out.

"Certainly, sir," said Uhura to his disappearing back. Then she turned to Tamas. "Now, just what was that all about?"

"Spock managed the mind meld. He may have found something to help Doctor McCoy, but he doesn't know yet."

Uhura drew a long breath. "It's that serious, then. Neither your nor Spock would have gone through that for a minor illness."

"He's dying, Uhura." They ate in silence. Uhura's face was averted from Tamas, but looking up she saw a tear fall beside's Uhura's plate. She put down her toast, and reached to draw Uhura's head onto her shoulder, surprised to feel how small Uhura was; somehow she hadn't noticed before. "Come on, sister, it's not that bad. If anyone can find a clue, Spock can."

"I know, Tamas, I know. I'm just ... to have him lying there, and nothing we can do, when he's done so much for us -- you don't know all the things he's done. Regenerated skin and bones, operated, psychoanalyzed, listened, complained, argued.... He brought me back from the Lord knows what once -- my mind was gone, almost. And now -- I can't help him at all?" She was crying in earnest now, and Tamas patted her ineffectually on the back. In a few minutes Uhura was recovered enough to smile through her tears. "Look at this! Walk me back to my quarters, Tamas; I'm just making a fool of myself here."

The few steps to the turbolift helped her to regain control. There was a touch of the old mischief in her face and voice as she asked, "By the way, how was the mind meld?"

Tamas faced her squarely. "Bearable," she said. "Frightening. Exhausting. Stripping. Enlightening."

"And what about Spock?"

"Now that I know him," said Tamas, "how can I not love him?" They left the lift and walked in silence to Uhura's door. "Sleep well, sister."

♦♦♦

Tamas was awakened by the door buzzer. "Come," she called from her bunk, half asleep. Uhura entered. "Uhura, what is it? Suddenly Tamas was completely awake. Doctor McCoy? Is he worse?"

"No, but I found out something you'll want to know. Spock'll never bother to tell you, but he found a clue in your mind! I just got off duty; I was on the bridge with the captain, and he asked for a report from Mr. Spock. Tamas, your husband and Doctor McCoy both had measles!"

"Measles! People don't get measles anymore! My mother was vaccinated for it, but I never was -- it's a dead disease. How could they have gotten measles?"

"Not quite dead, Tamas. Don't you remember the little epidemic about twenty-five years ago?"

"Uhura, I was on Sirath twenty-five years ago, and I was only five, anyway."

"I was small myself, but I remember, and we learned about it in school later. There was a strain of the virus being kept in a lab for research purposes, and someone was careless. It got loose in the southeastern part of North America where Dr. McCoy lives as a boy, and there were some deaths and a few cases of encephalitis. Doctor McCoy was about twelve at the time."

"Peter would have been five or six," Tamas said thoughtfully. "And you say he got the measles, too? It must have been on his chart, but I didn't notice. I wasn't reading the part about childhood illnesses, at least consciously."

"He had measles encephalitis," said Uhura, "which I gather is quite dangerous. There's no record of anything but the simple measles on the doctor's record, but Chris seems to believe that a very mild case might not be noticed or diagnosed. But Mr. Spock thinks there's a possibility that the measles virus may have left something behind that reacts with the Sirathian flu bug to produce this syndrome. Now they're working on something that will hit the measles part as hard as the Sirathian bug part. That's as much as I understood of what Mr. Spock told the

captain. But if it works, Tamas --if it works!" They embraced gleefully, and Uhura slipped out, leaving Tamas to a better sleep than the one that had been interrupted.

Tamas slept late, but when she awoke she hurried into her clothes, anxious to ask someone -- anyone -- what the word was on McCoy. But when she was dressed, she hesitated as to where to go. Uhura would certainly be asleep; the people in sickbay had enough on their hands; she hated to go to the bridge without being invited. She wandered the halls for awhile, joining the little groups of low-voiced crew, but they knew no more than she did. Discouraged, she had barely got back to her cabin when the door buzzed and Jim Kirk was there.

"I came to get you. Hurry. Bones is about to turn the corner, one way or the other."

"What? How do you know? This waiting is so horrible, Jim." They ran down the corridor to the turbolift, and Kirk slammed the call plate.

"Sickbay. Well, I gather they made up a combined dose -- a magic potion of some sort. I don't know. They gave it to him a few times, and each time they thought it was working. His life signs went in the right directions. But then he'd drop back to where he started. Increasing the frequency didn't help. It's all experimental, of course. Now they're going to try one massive dose, all at once, and I had to promise to get out of there fast if an emergency comes up. But I demanded they let me be there, if only --" The door opened, and they raced into the corridor.

"If only what, Jim?"

"If only to say goodbye." The sickbay door opened, and they were at the side of the doctor's bed, opposite Spock. At McCoy's head was Nurse Chapel.

"I just gave it to him, Captain," said Chris. It will take about five minutes to show any effect." She divided her attention between her patient and the life signs over his head. Kirk stood with his hands gripping the bed rails so hard that his knuckles were white. Spock looked alert and relaxed as usual, hands clasped behind his back, face like stone. Tamas stood quietly with her hands before her, thumbnails cutting into palms. Nothing happened for a very long time. Then there was a start from Chris. She was staring at the monitor, and something was moving on it. Tamas' eyes followed hers, and she almost missed the first sign from McCoy, a sudden motion, caught out of the corner of her eye. He seemed to convulse, and then the curled posture was replaced by a more normal one. Then his back arched, and an arm flailed out. Heartbeat and respiration shot up, along with blood pressure. Tamas couldn't read the other signs, but they were all moving. She saw alarm and anger on Chapel's face.

Jim was muttering under his breath, "Bones, come on, don't leave us now, come on Bones, we need you, stay, stay...."

Tamas was praying, "Please, please, please, please...."

Suddenly she heard a voice like a thunderstorm -- in the room? inside her head? -- //Leonard!// She stiffened, her eyes moving to Spock, who had not changed in stance or expression. Now he reached out a hand towards McCoy's forehead, and Tamas found herself being steered out of sickbay by her elbow.

She was out in the hall with the captain, still dazed by the power of the voice which she alone seemed to have heard. "You heard it, too," said Kirk. "Don't worry. It was Spock. He may be able to do something, but I won't go in there now unless he asks me to."

"But why? How could I hear him, when he wasn't touching me? That was his mindvoice, I think, but he didn't sound like that before -- my God!" She put a hand to her throbbing head.

"You heard him because you've melded with him. And because he was upset -- frightened, by Bones reaction."

"Yes, I knew he was afraid, but -- yes. That was fear -- even terror. Tell me, Jim, can you often 'hear' him that way?"

"Not often, no. Now and then, when he's particularly tired or disturbed it's happened. The mind meld seems to set up a semi-permanent link that can be

activated by strong emotion."

Temas stared blankly at the bulkhead. How horrible for someone like Spock to have people invading his mind without notice or permission. "How does he bear it, Jim? How can he ever offer to meld?"

"He rarely does. It has to be necessary, as it was for you. But Temas," he said, looking straight at her and compelling her by force of will to return the look, "I don't think it's so terrible -- I think it may be ... may be a good thing for some of his friends to know ... who he really is."

Kirk put an arm around Temas' shoulder, in a gesture meant to be comforting. But he, she thought, was the one who most needed comfort. "If anyone can do it, Spock can," she said, with a small, confident smile, and no idea at all of what Spock was trying to do. Kirk began to pace, and Temas folded herself up to sit on the deck and await. Few crewman passed; those who did looked anxiously at Kirk, then went soberly about their business. Everyone in the ship knew about the doctor's illness. Prayer vigils were being held by various sects, human and otherwise. The sickbay area seemed unusually quiet. They waited a long time.

Suddenly the door opened. Christine stood there, on her face a look of battle. "Come! He needs help!" Spock was still standing over the bed, his hand frozen to McCoy's face, but he was swaying on his feet and his face was blanched.

Temas looked from Spock to McCoy, and saw the same look on both, the look of someone who has almost given up the fight. Kirk put a hand on Spock's shoulder and pulled. "Stop it, Spock, I can't lose you, too!" Spock's body moved with Kirk's pull, but his fingers remained implanted on McCoy.

"Help me, Jim," he whispered.

"How, Spock? I can't -- I don't have any --"

"Get Temas."

"Here, Spock, I'm here!" Without knowing what she was to do, she reached for Spock's free hand, and gripped it with all her strength. She shuddered and almost fell, as she felt -- something -- going from her. "Who touched me?" she thought wildly, "Someone touched me, for I felt that power had gone out of me." Then her mind emptied, and she forgot Spock's hand that she held and Kirk's hand that upheld her.

It was Kirk's hand that shook her, hard, and Kirk's voice that said to her, softly, "It's over. You did it. Look at him; he's asleep." Temas shook her head, felt herself blacking out, and grabbed the bed rail. When her head cleared, she saw McCoy sleeping naturally, like a healthy child, and Kirk leading Spock to a chair. She saw him shake himself and stand upright.

"I am quite well, Captain, I assure you. Miss Renarde, your abilities are worth cultivating."

Jim laughed shakily. "You can give her lessons later, Spock. Right now, I'll bet Nurse Chapel will prescribe a meal and rest for you."

Chris was staring at the monitors. When she turned, Temas could see the tears pouring down her face. She smiled waveringly. "Certainly, Mr. Spock, go have some plomik soup and get to bed. And Mr. Spock, thank you."

"Logically--" began Spock. Kirk gave a peremptory nod in the direction of the door, and Spock subsided. On his way out, he glanced at the monitors, and Temas thought she could detect signs of a vast satisfaction in his still face.

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McCoy's recovery was rapid. By the next day it was decided that he could have special visitors. It seems that everyone in the ship regarded himself as special. People moved in and out all day long, and Nurse chapel sighed and laughed and give up trying to stop the tide. The flow of visitors seemed to do McCoy good. "Well, wouldya look at that," he marveled, after a crewman had put his head in at the door with a big grin and called, "Hey, Doc, glad to have you back!" "Chris, you remember how damn stubborn that fellow was at his physical. I'd'a thought he'd be glad to see me go."

Temas looked up from the book she was reading, having settled herself for the day in Sickbay. "I wouldn't count on anyone not welcoming your recovery, Doctor.



You should see what Spock's having to put up with in the halls. Everyone wants to thank him for saving you! He's getting hoarse explaining that it was merely logic that dictated—" But McCoy and Chapel were in hysterics.

Kirk looked at them strangely as he breezed in. "Well, that's a fine way to act, for a man just pulled back from death's door! Not to mention the lead weeper in our Weeping Trio."

"What's that, Jim - weeping what?"

"Well, Bones, while you were asleep last night, we decided to enter Chris and Tamas here, and Uhura, in the Intergalactic Harmonic Weeping Contest. We were sure we had a winning team, but now I don't know." He shook his head sadly, looking at the broad grins on Chris and Tamas. Uhura burst in, humming under her breath. "Yep, there goes the contest."

Chapter 10

After a few more days even Nurse Chapel willingly declared Doctor McCoy fit for duty. He seemed to bound back as easily as any Sirathian, now that the measles complication had been bested. When invitations to the palace arrived at the Enterprise, no one could say he wasn't fit to accept. The invitations arrived simultaneously, one for Captain Kirk ("and any retinue he may care to bring"), one for Tamas, and one for Doctor McCoy ("who has worked so diligently among us, at such cost"). Tamas wondered at first how the palace knew about McCoy's illness. "We sent them word, of course," said Kirk, "when we pulled the Humans off the planet. It would have been ... undiplomatic just to pull our head into our shell and say nothing. Don't you think so?"

"I'll never be a diplomat, I fear, Jim. I forgot there was a planet down there at all while Bones was sick." She laughed. "But now -- now I'm looking forward to showing you to the Emperor and the Emperor to you."

They were given coordinates for the palace's front lawn, and beamed down, only four of them, as the captain's "retinue" consisted of Spock.

A small man in black greeted them with Sirathian courtesy, which, like Vulcan courtesy, had the advantage of being unmistakable. He led them immediately into a room that Tamas recognized, though more from the sharpened memories of mind meld than from her childhood. It was a formal audience room, about seven meters square. The walls were hidden behind hangings which were covered with repeated naturalistic designs, showing the plants and animals of various parts of the planet. The floor was covered with matting in which the differing colors of the reeds were interwoven to form subtle patterns. There was no furniture in the center of the room, but around the walls were many lightweight wickerwork pieces, looking like a cross between a chair and a bench. Between two arches in what seemed a place of honor was an incongruous looking bombe front chest of drawers. Tamas drew in her breath at the sight of it. It had been a gift from her mother to the Emperor-- a great rarity. Wood did not exist on Sirath.

The Enterprise party stood at ease in the middle of the room, the doctor looking somewhat uncomfortable. In a few moments the Emperor entered. Tamas had all she could do not to run to him like the child she used to be. She drank him in --medium height, medium coloring, the lines between brown and blue very blurred. He was not in any way a distinguished looking man; he would instantly be lost in the smallest of crowds. He was unprepossessing, but to Tamas he was the essence of childhood and security. To her surprise, she felt her eyes filling; it was almost as if a parent had returned to her.

When she could stop looking at him for a moment, she found that introductions had been performed and that Kirk and McCoy were both looking cheerful. The Emperor sat down, and Tamas picked up a chair to bring it near him, the others following her example. The chairs were easy for humans, if they were willing to put their feet up and relax. Tamas had never seen Spock look so comfortable. She was bursting to speak to the Emperor, but held back, unsure that the license granted a

child would hold for the adult that the child had become. Better to wait until the Emperor spoke to her.

When he did speak, it was first to the captain, "Captain James T. Kirk, I welcome you and your ship to Sirath, in the name of all the people of Sirath. I feel deep regret that an illness contracted on our planet should have endangered the life of your chief medical officer. Doctor. I hope you have not become irrevocably prejudiced against us by your very unpleasant experience. Miss Renarde, Recorder as you are now, I am happy to welcome you back to the palace. You have changed very much, Recorder, since your childhood days on Sirath."

"Emperor, I am so glad to be back." And at the moment, in spite of kidnapping and sickness, she was glad. She looked at the Emperor, and could not believe he was not the man who had played games with her when she was a child.

"Sirath seems very beautiful," said McCoy, smiling. "I don't think getting sick here will make me hate it. We isolated the virus, that's the main thing."

"Indeed," added Spock, "the illness seemed to aid the doctor in finding the cause and cure. On the whole, it may have been fortunate that he became ill."

"Oh yeah? Well, just you try it next time, Spock," muttered McCoy.

"Emperor," said Kirk, "the illness was no one's fault, except the Azametines', who knowingly spread it to the planets they traded with. But we have had another difficulty, which we sent you word of some days ago. I must point out that a Federation citizen has been abducted and injured on your planet." Tamas, who had heard his outrage on the Enterprise, could hardly believe that this gentle voice was Kirk's. Either this was his diplomatic tone, or the Emperor had impressed him greatly.

"Yes, Captain, I was most concerned about that. Was it a member of your crew who was so badly treated?"

"It was I, Emperor," said Tamas, in response to a slight turn of the captain's head. "They seemed to think that I could overthrow you singlehandedly. They were quite determined to force me to assist them."

The Emperor nodded in the Sirathian way, head to one side and hand tapping his cheek. "Yes. Yes. And you could, of course, Recorder."

"I could?" said Tamas, attempting to feel her way without giving out too much information.

"Do you remember the fire?" The question seemed to be rhetorical for he continued, "It was I who rescued you."

"Then you are a clone," said Kirk.

"Fascinating," murmured Spock.

The Emperor raised his hands, then set them in his lap. "The forty-sixth in my line. Each of us serves twenty-three years. I am in the second year of my service."

Kirk glanced at Spock. "Approximately 1,595.38 Terran years, Captain."

"The Immortal Emperor."

"Indeed, Captain."

"Now that you know," said the Emperor calmly, "What do you plan to do?"

"Now that you know we know," said Kirk, "what are you going to do, Emperor?"

"There is little that I can do," said the Emperor, turning to Tamas. "Hasiyet Renarde, your mother, was a person of great discretion and, I think, wisdom. I very much hope that you are like her in those qualities, Recorder."

"You could kill us," suggested McCoy, somewhat to Tamas' annoyance. "That might be the wisest decision."

"No," said the Emperor. "I won't kill you. I can't, you know. And killing you would doubtless not preserve my secret. You did not suddenly guess, but confirmed a suspicion which I must believe is recorded on your ship or confided to your crew. I am not a fool, Captain, although my wisdom is certainly fallible -- as witness the impetuosity that sent me running to snatch Tamas, before her parents knew that a fire had started, or the servants knew that Tamas was home."

"Do you think, Emperor," said Spock curiously, "that it would have been wiser to let Tamas burn to death to preserve your secret?"

The Emperor sounded warmly humorous, as he turned to Spock. "Mr. Spock, not since my childhood has anyone asked a question to test me. This is quite a nostalgic experience. No, Mr. Spock, I do not think that. What I do think is that Tamas would have been quite as safe had I merely sounded the alarm. It is possible that her parents would be alive, also, as they would have found her and brought her out, rather than dying in their search for her." Tamas stopped breathing. The voices around her faded out to a meaningless buzz. Then the doctor was bending over her, putting a hypo back into his bag. The Emperor was leading the way out, with Kirk behind him, and Spock bringing up the rear. She grabbed McCoy's arm and stood up with her head swimming.

"You were pretty close to fainting, there. D'you feel better now? There's no hurry."

"No, I'm fine, let's catch up with the others. I'm sorry, Doctor. It was just — I never realized exactly how my parents died."

"It's not pleasant, but it's not the worst way to die, Tamas."

"Dying in a fire for no reason at all? Her question was a whispered shriek."

"No, I mean ... there are worse ways to go than hunting for your child. I don't want any guilt feelings about this, Tamas. It had nothing to do with you; you were only a child. And if the Emperor is right — well, your parents weren't the first, nor the last to die because of an error in someone's judgement. I've seen enough of that, God knows. Even Jim makes mistakes. And when a starship captain makes a mistake, the consequences are often fatal for somebody." At this point Spock, who had turned a corner ahead, stepped back to look for them and they hurried to join him.

They found the captain and Spock with the Emperor in a room full of maps and globes. "-- political divisions," the Emperor was saying, as he revolved a large globe with one hand. "Here," he said, pointing with two fingers, one dark brown, the other pale blue. "This is where I, or rather, my many-times-removed forebearer lived 8851 years ago. He was the leader of a small nation, not very rich or well-known. But he was a good leader, an exceptionally good leader. You, Captain, know how difficult and how rewarding it is to lead and know that people will follow. Well, this first self of mine had a natural gift for leadership. He was wise, though not yet old, and inspired trust in all who knew him. His small nation prospered, planting and reaping and preserving under his direction. He fostered new ideas, rather than smothering them. He protected the weak, rewarding those who helped the poor and punishing those who oppressed them. Compassion flourished under his rule, and wickedness was not rewarded."

"That was the first of my line, and he was visited by someone not of this world, whether god or man or angel, I do not know. The visitor demonstrated power to destroy, and terrified my ancestor for the safety of his nation. Then he promised to do them no harm, if my forbearer would give his life for theirs. The visitor had to move quickly then, because my forbearer snatched up a knife and buried it in his breast, and all but died. But the visitor had skills to heal him. He was at that time twenty years old, and had ruled for seven years."

"The god or angel or man told him that he had passed a test, and that he would be required to give his life again at the end of sixteen more years. 'Although not old, you will die,' he said, 'and another you will take your place, and he will reign twenty-three years in his turn, and the people will always have you to rule them, and you will always have the people to rule.' So the god or angel or man showed my forbearer how to make another self from a piece of himself, and he gave him the tools to do so. He gave him no advice about secrecy, or in what direction to take his people, which is what makes me think it must have been a god or an angel, for a man would not have behaved so."

"Since then, we have ruled our people. There have been few wars — none at all for a very long time. There has been no conquest, although very many peoples have put themselves under our protection. For many years, most of Sirath has been united. The people — are still people. They fight among themselves, one by one or two by two. We have governments, and police forces. Some people are poorer than

others. They buy and sell, and sometimes cheat. But there are no wars, no catastrophic crop failures, no economic crises. I plan well, I believe. I am only a man, but it is astonishing what one man can do, given the time I and my predecessors have had. Governments change, but the Emperor goes on, and always with the same goals -- peace, and freedom from oppression." He stopped abruptly. "I would not see this end. Yet, if it is to be, I cannot stop it."

Kirk seemed to want to understand better. "Something you said back there -- that you can't kill us. Why not? It might at least buy time for you, after all. Why not?"

The Emperor looked surprised, and Spock spoke up. "Emperor, we have been on many planets, and found few on which a leader would not kill to protect information of this magnitude. Many of the peoples of the galaxy will kill for much less -- indeed, for little or nothing."

The Emperor walked slowly to the side of the room, and pulled a chair forward. He seated himself, and seemed lost in thought as the others, after a moment's hesitation, did the same. "I have never been questioned about my motives," he said, "and I have rarely questioned myself. I know what is right for Sirath, and that is what I do. Usually, what is right for Sirath is right for me; what have I to want, after all, but Sirath's good? But I am not by nature a particularly good man." Tamas made a movement of protest, then blushed at the Emperor's questioning glance.

"Excuse me, Emperor, but by my standards, you are a very good man. Aren't you being overly modest?"

"That last word did not translate, Recorder."

"Modesty is a purposely low estimate of one's worth, considered polite in my culture."

"An interesting custom. I was not underestimating myself, I assure you. I am by nature a very good leader, but not a particularly good man. But a particularly good man is needed for this job. One thing that helps me to follow the right is the knowledge of the sham that I am. My empire is built on a lie; I allow that lie to go uncorrected day after day and year after year. I am not immortal, yet I am called immortal. Without that lie, I would no longer rule. But it is because of that large lie at the very center of me that I abhor all other lies and deceptions, all crimes and evil."

"I almost understand," said Kirk. Spock looked thoughtful.

"Well, of course," said McCoy. The Emperor turned on him a smile that was wholly his own. Tamas gasped to see it, as if appearing from her memories. But it had a familiarity aside from her memories, and she struggled to pin it down. The Emperor was talking again, but she was tracking his smile through her mind and didn't hear him. Unconsciously, she followed the group, staring at the floor, and almost bumped into the captain. She looked up, straight at the captain's face, and found the source of familiarity. The Emperor's smile had reminded her of Kirk's -- not in any particular contour, but in being a smile not to be refused, and one certainly not expecting to be refused. The captain and the Emperor had a lot in common, as the Emperor had seen at once.

They were at the end of a corridor, in front of a door that opened to a dusty room. All Tamas could see was that it appeared somewhat like an abandoned chemical laboratory. There were several counters made of the same masonry as the rest of the palace, and seeming to grow from the floor. There were various pieces of arcane equipment and a lot of glassware. But McCoy and Spock studied it carefully, leaving footprints in the dust as they strolled round, and lifting dust sheets to peer at the various instruments.

While Spock asked questions of the Emperor, McCoy spoke quietly to the captain.

"This equipment is incredibly primitive, Jim."

"But it could work?"

"Oh, it could work, all right, with a lot of care. If it were cleaned up some. Looks as if it hasn't been used in years."

"It hasn't, Doctor," said the Emperor. "Did you think I grew clones like thugas -- row upon row, and store them for the winter? I made one, and I would not normally return to this room until it is time to educate him. Then he and I will clean it as the former Emperor and I did when I was young, and I will teach him as I was taught. If, that is, the Recorder's acquaintances do not succeed in their intentions.

"Travelers," said the Emperor, after a few moments of silence, "as you know what few others know, it is fitting that you see what many have seen, but few with understanding." He rose and conducted them back through the doorway and down a long hall. "This is a charitable project," he said, "which I have maintained almost since I ascended my throne. You will know how to appreciate its true worth."

Chapter 11

The Emperor indicated a door, which Kirk then opened. They entered a large, sunny room that seemed to be full of children. There were really, Tamas saw after a moment, only seven or eight. They varied in age from Terran-equivalent eleven or twelve, down to an infant too small to sit up. As the strangers came in and the Emperor dismissed the attendants, the children surrounded them, totally unafraid. In a moment, two were wrestling with the Emperor, McCoy had picked up and was doing a medical check in between kitchy-koos, Kirk had a little boy climbing on his back, and Tamas was kneeling and cuddling a little girl. Spock raised an eyebrow as he looked at his captain, who was decidedly ruffled by the child's attentions.

One small boy, just learning to walk, stood in a corner and stared at the strangers. Then, as if making up his mind, he walked unsteadily past Tamas, who reached a hand out to him, past Kirk, falling down once on the way, straight to Spock. When he reached Spock's feet, he propped himself against his knees and held both hands high in a gesture that needed no translator. Spock looked down at him.

"He wants you to pick him up, Spock," McCoy said in the annoyed tones of someone forced to explain the obvious.

Spock's eyes turned to Kirk. His face showed nothing, but Tamas thought there was a hint of a plea in his stillness. Kirk smiled broadly, "Pick him up, Mr. Spock."

Tamas watched as Spock stiffly bent and put his hands under the baby's arms. The baby stared wide-eyed at Spock as he was lifted in the air, level with Spock's face. They looked at each other. "Like this, Spock," said Tamas gently, and picked up the little girl she was playing with. Spock imitated her motions and settled the baby comfortably on his forearm, the baby's head nestled against Spock's shoulder. The baby reached out a hand to Spock's mouth. Spock turned his head, obeying the pull of the small fingers, and looked at the baby's face. Spock's right arm came up slowly, and began to pat the baby's back. When Tamas saw his hand take on a rhythmic motion of its own, and his body begin to sway almost imperceptibly, she let out her breath. She heard two other breaths released as well, and realized that Kirk and McCoy had been following the little drama as eagerly as she had. Spock glanced around with impassive countenance, daring anyone to say anything. Kirk and McCoy smiled unconsciously. Tamas drank in the sight of them with the children. This is part of their missing life, she thought, the life they can't have because of the one they have chosen. I wouldn't want them to change -- but I am glad to have seen this.

She kissed the child she held then, and forgot the other adults in the room in the warm, cuddly feeling. A noise was heard, but Tamas didn't immediately recognize it. She noticed more quickly the jerk of the captain's head, and the sudden stillness of Spock. Only as the room faded out did she realize that she had heard the hum, something different than the sound on the Enterprise, of a transporter. But instead of finding themselves at a public transporter, when the beam faded they were in a room that looked terribly familiar. Not back here again,



she thought hopelessly. Even a different prison wouldn't have seemed so bad, but here were the same stone walls and floor, the same long ramp, the same sleeping platform and the same blankets in the corner. Despairing, she felt doomed to end up here no matter what she did.

Kirk reached for his communicator and flipped it open as soon as he was materialized. He was handicapped by the child on his back, and in a moment the same Sirathians who had kidnapped Tamas surrounded them, armed, and had removed weapons, communicators, and the doctor's medical equipment. The babies began to scream, and the Sirathians disappeared, leaving the lights on, Tamas noted with relief. Automatically, she began to soothe the little girl she carried, but Spock stopped her with a touch on the arm and a low-voiced explanation. "We must suppose that the Sirathians are listening to us; under the cover of the children's crying, we may speak fairly freely." The adults gathered in a close circle, with the children still crying loudly.

"This is the same place I was in before," said Tamas, feeling more and more like crying herself.

"If you got out that time," said McCoy, "we ought to be able to do it this time, too."

"We have to get out first," said the captain, "but after that -- I wish I knew what these people really want. Any ideas, Spock?"

"Obviously, Captain, they want the information that they believe Miss Renarde alone to carry. As for what they want to do with it, apparently they want to change the government, but do not wish merely to assassinate the Emperor. Had they wished that, he would be here instead of us. Rather, they hope to discredit him with the populace."

"Would that work?"

"Unknown, Captain. Our knowledge of public opinion on this planet is scanty."

"Tamas, do you know?"

"If they can prove he's not immortal -- yes, that would work, I think. It would have worked with the service people in our house when I was a child, and with my tutors. Immortality is a significant part of the Emperor's appeal. His wisdom and compassion are held to spring from that immortality." Tamas heard herself sounding like a regular member of the crew. The captain seemed to take command in a cellar as easily as on his own bridge.

"Any suggestions, anyone, before we quiet these children?"

"Might I suggest that Miss Renarde attempt to contact Lieutenant Uhura?" said Spock. His baby was already quiet, Tamas saw. She nodded, then followed the captain's lead in soothing the child she held. After a few minutes of rocking, kissing, and soothing murmurs in Sirathian and Standard, the room was blessedly quiet. The little girl McCoy held was asleep, and he laid her gently on the sleeping platform. Kirk's little boy played somewhat sadly with Tamas' little girl. And Spock still held a sleeping baby who clutched his tunic tightly. Tamas sat on the sleeping platform and tried to think of Uhura, but could not compose herself. Various fears and worries chased each other around her mind. Spock put his spare hand to his head. "Miss Renarde, you are improving in power, but not in direction," he said. "Perhaps it would be best to wait until you are ready to sleep." Tamas blushed, and fell to examining the corners of the room. She found a sliver of rock on the floor, and began to sharpen it by rubbing it against the wall.

"You never know," she said in answer to McCoy questioning glance. As she worked she studied the men, who were going over every centimeter of the walls and ceiling with strong fingers, looking for weaknesses, she supposed. She looked at the sleeping babies and playing children. I'm sorry you got dragged into this with us, she thought. With me, I mean. I'm the one who caused the trouble in the first place, I and the Emperor's big mouth. If he really were immortal, he would have learned better than to trust people. But then -- he'd probably be so suspicious by now that there'd be no bearing him. She began to think there was something to be

said for mortality.

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Their captors returned before the cellar inspection was complete. The first thing they did was to return the translators which they had taken with the phasers and communicators.

"Now," said the biggest of them, "all of you but the Recorder, get on the sleeping platform." The Sirathians were heavily armed, and something hollow was aimed at Tamas. She stood up, while the others reluctantly sat down. In her palm she held the sharpened sliver of rock, held it so tightly it hurt, tightened her grip even more, moved the rock across her skin until she felt a trickle run down her hand that might have been sweat but was probably blood. She shifted her grip slightly, and turned to see what was happening at the sleeping platform. Two Sirathians were guarding it. Spock was slowly uncurling the baby's fingers from his tunic, while he stroked the baby's head and back to keep him asleep. McCoy and Kirk tried to comfort the other three children. Kirk looked at Tamas helplessly. There was nothing he could do that would not endanger the children, and Tamas was relieved to see that he knew it. She faced the third Sirathian again, and said in a reasonable tone, "I have done you no harm, but you have offended me twice. I have no knowledge of what you want to know." That was an outright lie, now. Tamas was not in the habit of telling lies; she felt herself move a step nearer her grave, as if she had lost a kind of innocence. She leaned towards the Sirathian and held out her uninjured hand palm down, in a Sirathian gesture that her old nursemaid had often used when asking questions such as, "Where can you have put your pajamas?" An occasional familiar gesture, she hoped, might reassure the man enough to let her get close to him.

"What do you want of us?" she said, and moved a step closer.

The man she had called Junior stood straight and looked at her, then spoke in a surprisingly gentle tone. "We have told you, Recorder; you know that we want your knowledge. We want our people to be free, as yours are, and we need your help to accomplish our goal."

"Aren't you free, now?" the captain asked, speaking over the head of the child he held. "I haven't seen any evidence of tyranny on this planet. Mr. Spock, does this seem like an oppressed planet to you?"

"Negative, Captain. A more prosperous, peaceful, and uncoerced population than we have often seen. On a superficial inspection, of course. It is possible that more data would change that conclusion."

The one with the gun — "Mama" — spoke up. "Let me try to explain. For the last twenty years or so, Sirath has had some communication with Earth, which I understand to be the seat of your Federation."

Longer than that, surely, Tamas thought. Oh. Sirathian years. About right, I guess. She edged a little closer to Junior.

"The mother of the Recorder was the Federation ambassador to Sirath, but upon her death the Emperor made no request for another. Even so, we have all heard and read about Earth. It seems different from Sirath in one crucial respect: Earth has no Emperor. On Earth, the people decide for themselves."

"Now, wait a minute," the doctor broke in. "Sounds like you think people on Earth can run around doing whatever they please. Well, they can't."

"For example, Kidnappers," said Tamas, "I must tell you that what you are doing to us on Earth would be a serious offense, and heavily punished."

"It is a terrible thing to do, to lay hold of someone and force him to go where you will," said "Papa" suddenly. He seemed quite serious. "It is such an offense as only the most ardent patriotism can justify."

"Patriotism! Is that what you call it?" asked McCoy. "Power-hunger is what I'd call it. You want to take over, and you want us to help you."

"Take over? But, take over what?"

"Sirath, of course. The whole planet. You don't like the ruler you have, and you want to replace him with someone you like better — you."

The old man seemed truly astonished. "But, do all of you think then, that we

want to take the Emperor's place?"

"It seems -- obvious," said Kirk. "You kidnapped and seriously injured a guest on my ship, and now you have the four of us -- what good you think that's going to do you, I don't know, but we've seen power plays before. The Emperor has the power; you want the power. Simple enough."

"Simple to you, perhaps, but not to us, I assure you. Power is by no means our goal. Not all of us even want a role in bringing the new government. I do not, for one. Our only goal, our only wish, is to bring the Emperor down. Then when he is gone, a democratic state will bloom in the fertile soil of our planet."

"Ah, but who is to plant the seeds for the democracy that will grow in this beautiful garden you are contemplating?" asked the captain.

"I don't quite understand, Captain."

"What are your plans for after the Emperor leaves?"

The Sirathians stared at him.

"Wait a second." Kirk was on his feet now, but the Sirathians didn't seem to notice. "Do you mean -- do you honestly believe -- that if you throw out the Emperor, democracy will come by default? You can't possibly be that naive."

Temas added her voice to his. "Kidnappers, democracy isn't what you get when there's no government."

McCoy was saying something about, "Tyranny -- if you're lucky. Or chaos, more likely." Only Spock was silent. The Sirathians were protesting, but it was impossible to hear them, and then the children began to wake and cry at the noise. In the midst of the confusion Temas thought, Now or never, and leaped at Junior, using her sharpened rock to scrape the skin of his forearm. Almost casually, he shook her off, throwing her against the far wall, but not before she had wiped her bleeding palm on his bleeding arm.

"Choar rasgy kvopthar!" she yelled as he came after her, and held up her hand.

"These are my friends," she added in Standard, and gave way to unconsciousness.

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When she awoke, she was in a different room altogether, with fading evening sunlight coming through a round Sirathian window, and something cool on her aching head. Kirk was speaking into his communicator. "Keep locked onto us, Scotty; and Uhura, I'll keep the channel open. Listen and record."

Doctor McCoy ran his tricorder over Temas as soon as he noticed her eyes open, then gave her some pain killer and a glass of Sirathian pira berry wine. She sat up to drink, then closed her eyes at the pain. "You'll feel better in twenty minutes or so. Better lie down till then." Obediently, she lay down, looking around at the comfortable furnishings, the food on a shelf, the children playing with toys -- where had the toys come from? Another sleeping platform held the two youngest babies, one of whom was stirring. Temas reached out her arms.

"Let me have him." It was the one she thought of as "Spock's baby", and it was Spock, looking quite comfortable now in the role of nurse, who brought him to her. The baby went straight back to sleep in Spock's arms, and didn't wake when Temas took him. She cuddled the warm body and kissed the mostly-blue head. "I know you, I think," Temas said, half to herself, "but who are you?"

"I believe," said Spock cautiously, "that he may resemble someone of your acquaintance very closely."

"Oh? Oh! Yes, Mr. Spock, that would be a logical inference, would it not?"

Temas sat up. "Well, how are things?" she said to the room in general.

"'Things' are just fine," returned the doctor, sounding almost annoyed. "They did a minimum of damage to you, and whatever you said to 'em stopped 'em dead in their tracks. Before we knew what was happening, they'd switched from offense to defense, and herded us up to this room. They gave us back our equipment, all of it, even our weapons, and asked us as nice as you please not to leave until they had a chance to talk to you. We could have walked out any time. Now would you please tell us what you said?"

Temas grinned. "The best translation I know is, 'We be of one blood, thou and I'," She spock into the translator, "Choar rasgy kvopthar". "We are of the same

descent," said the translator.

"I like Kipling's better," said Tamas. "His was a Master Word, too. I didn't trust the translator to get the Sirathian exactly according to formula."

McCoy looked ready to burst. Kirk looked rather impatient, too. "Spell it out, please, Tamas."

"I cut my hand," Tamas said, opening her palm for them to see, "and I scraped his arm, and I pressed his blood to mine. Then I claimed kinship. Naturally they can't hurt me if I'm a relative, and they can't hurt you, because you're my friends. The only trouble is that they'll expect our help now, in whatever they're planning, and I don't know if we can give it to them."

"They didn't ask very nicely," grumbled McCoy, as he cleaned and patched Tamas' hand.

"On the contrary, Doctor," said Spock, "though their methods could hardly be recommended for promoting good will, they certainly used far less than the force one would expect from a ruthless revolutionary group."

Tamas could see McCoy and Kirk agreeing with Spock. She couldn't but wonder what experiences they'd had to make them take this one so easily. Then Kirk turned on her.

"However," he said firmly, "that was a damned stupid thing to do, Tamas. It was ill-planned, foolhardy, and unnecessary. We were beginning to get them to talk to us, and without any awkward kinship bonds. You may very well have gotten us into more trouble than you got us out of."

It was a moment before Tamas could control herself to answer. Shock and chagrin clogged her throat. "I'm certainly glad," she said with an attempt at a superior smile, "that I'm not a member of your crew. I suppose you make a habit out of humiliating them in public. I, fortunately, am a civilian, and free to move off the ship at any time. I acted as I thought best, Captain, and I shall continue to do so." But she was suddenly convinced that she had been wrong. She squeezed the baby so hard that he gave a cry, and immediately Spock was standing next to her. "Here, Spock, you can hold him if you want," Tamas whispered, and lay back down with her eyes closed. She opened them when she felt something brush her calf. It was Kirk's hip, as he sat down facing her. He took her hand.

"Tamas," he said quietly, "I'm sorry. It is not my habit to humiliate my people, in public or in private. I'm worried, and I guess you got the worst of both worlds -- expected to behave like Starfleet, but treated as I would never treat Starfleet personnel. I do think you must do as you think best." He smiled faintly and gripped her hand harder. "Friends?"

Tamas suppressed the part of her that wanted to slap him. He was so damned confident! Encouraging the part that wanted to give in and be friends, she managed to sit up and smile, too. "Shall we kiss and make up, Jim?" He leaned forward. "No, Jim," she said dryly, "you needn't actually do it; you've already accomplished your goal."

He looked startled, annoyed, sheepish, and then resigned. He sat back, hands spread in mock apology, then bent quickly to give her a swift, soft kiss on the lips. "Just because I wanted to," he said quietly, with laughing eyes.

Spock and McCoy, thank goodness or perception, were across the room with Spock's baby, examining him or playing with him. "Do you know who that baby is, Jim?" Tamas asked, low voiced.

"Who? Oh -- not --?"

"I believe so, and so does Spock. He looks very ordinary, but there's a feeling about him..."

"I wish he weren't here. I wish all of them weren't here. Maybe you can get your relatives to send them back." She flinched. "Sorry," he said, smiling, and this time she was able to smile back more easily. "I didn't mean it that way."

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When the Sirathians entered -- not without calling out first -- the first thing Tamas asked was, "Can you send these poor babies back home? They shouldn't be mixed up in this mess."

Papa answered, "I'm afraid not, Recorder. We have no one to spare to send with them."

"You could transport them, couldn't you?"

Papa actually laughed slightly. "Do I look so rich, then? Transporting you was extremely expensive. We will return the children in due time. I am sure that the seven of us can adequately care for four children." He pulled a seat out from next to the wall, and sat down on it. His colleagues followed suit and so, after a moment, did Kirk. When Kirk sat down, so did Spock, McCoy, and Tamas. Everyone stared at one another for a slow fifteen seconds. Then Papa spoke. "I am a member of the Sogut family, and my name is Sair."

"I am Captain James T. Kirk, of the starship Enterprise."

"Is the Recorder a member of your crew, Captain?"

"I am not," said Tamas. "I have been a guest on his ship, but I am a free woman and part of no family."

"You are part of our family, now, Younger Sister. Blood of our blood and body of our body. And yet. And yet... I find that I don't altogether trust you, Recorder."

Tamas sighed. "You are right, Elder Brother, not to trust me. Customs are different on Terra than here. I cannot be sure that I will not offend against you."

"I see," said Sair approvingly, "that truth is a custom of honor on Earth as on our world." Tamas went hot with shame.

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A day later, Tamas was being flown over large waste areas by two of the three Sirathians who had abducted her. Transporting, as they had said, was too expensive to be used casually.

The plane looked much like the Terran planes she had seen, but larger. It was used for transporting goods as well as people, where on Earth airplanes were strictly for sport. Therefore, the Sirathian plane had a heavier, more utilitarian look, but the basic structure — wings shaped to raise the weight, a tail to maneuver, a fuselage hung between the wings — was the same as Terran design, and the same as the design of the birds on Earth and Sirath. Tamas found it disturbing to hang in the air with only a thin metal skin between her and the powerful pull of the planet's gravity.

It was also irritatingly slow to someone accustomed to a transporter beam for long distances, but it did give a view of the country they traversed. Tamas watched, and made some notes on the language and customs in her recorder, but she was ready to scream with boredom by the time they arrived.

The place they arrived at was decidedly Sirathian, yet different than the city she knew so well. The buildings had the same irregular, low, cloudlike shapes, but they were yellowish instead of pink, and placed farther apart. They were set in the midst of a large expanse of growing fields, planted with a variety of what she supposed were food crops. The fields were more or less round, the corners and spaces between fields filled in by bushes large and small. One oddity of Sirath, from a Terran viewpoint, was that trees had never developed there.

Children ran to the plane after it set down, forming a noisy escort as Tamas, with "Mama" (whose name was Sahi) and Sair, led the way to a building that looked no different than the others, through a door and an inner arch. At an inner door, they called their greetings and entered. Inside was a man.

He was standing in the center of the room. If the Emperor seemed at first a nonentity, this man was the reverse. He had presence. His face was medium brown, with a wide, clearly marked streak of blue across his eyes that made him look masked. His eyes were the same deep blue as the skin around them, his hair totally shaved. Large, strong hands hung from wiry arms. He said nothing.

"Head, this is the Recorder from Terra, the child of the Ambassador. She has declared membership in our family."

Tamas stood straight, not knowing the correct etiquette for the occasion. She waited for the Head to speak.

"Recorder, welcome to the Sogut family. Your declaration has affected our plans drastically, but I am sure you will know how to remedy that."

CHAPTER 12

"Permission to come aboard, Captain."

"Granted. Beam her up."

When she materialized on the transporter platform, Kirk was waiting. Gladly she put her hand in his, and enjoyed the humanness of the gesture. "It's nice to be back here, Jim. It feels like a long time."

"Only a matter of hours, Tamas. Has it been bad?"

"Not bad, exactly, but hard. I need advice, Jim, and the experts are all here. I'm going to hunt them up and see what I learn, if that's all right with you."

"Better, yet. I'll arrange a briefing for you in — let's see — about an hour? Who do you want to see?"

"I guess just you and Bones and Spock and Uhura, unless you can think of someone else."

Two hours later, they were still in the briefing room, somewhat frazzled.

"Do you run into many situations like this, Jim?" Tamas asked.

Kirk looked startled. "Like this? Immortal Emperors and naive revolutionaries?"

"No, I mean this confusing, this uncertain."

"Oh, that. Yes, fairly frequently. Such situations have the advantage of not being deadly to anyone, but they're very irritating. Mr. Spock, would you like to sum up?"

"Certainly, Captain. Miss Renarde personally is in an unenviable position. She has pledged herself to a family that wishes her to betray the Emperor, an old friend to whom she also owes her life. She may choose to betray her family, or to betray the Emperor. Alternatively, she may persuade the Emperor to step down, or the family to recant its revolutionary position.

"Our position is simpler. There is no justification in Federation law or Starfleet regulations for interfering in the local politics of a peaceful planet. If we were to announce the fact of the Emperor's mortality, we would be guilty of the grossest interference."

"Guilty of telling the truth, you mean, Spock," said McCoy.

"Not all truths need be told, Doctor."

"Mr. Spock, what would be the results if this truth were told?" asked Uhura.

"The Emperor is the largest repository of power in by far the largest nation on the planet. With his downfall, the seat of power would be empty. Humanoids being what they are, it seems most unlikely that no contenders would arise."

"War, Spock?" said McCoy in almost a whisper.

"Highly probable."

"Do you know that they don't even have a modern word for war?" Uhura said.

"The one they use is obsolete — they have to define it when they use the word. I wonder if they'd even know how to fight a war."

"The concept, Commander, is remarkably easy to formulate."

"It would come back to them, you mean," grumbled McCoy. "Like murder, or riding a bicycle, you never lose the knack."

"But what is right?" asked Tamas. "Is even war better than absolute rule? I can see that I've put myself in a position where I can only wrong someone. You were perfectly right about that, Captain. But at least I ought to be able to know which wrong to do!"

"Normally," said Kirk, "I would say that dictatorship is worse even than war. But I've never seen a dictatorship like this — run by a man who is gradually divesting himself of power, who is willing to die before his time and let his duplicate take over, who really seems to care about the people more than himself."

"The library records I brought back do show a gradual increase in the power held by the people," said Tamas. "Elections have been held for about three or four hundred Terran years, first for lower officials and later for higher ones. Of course, the Emperor could turn the elected officials out, but he doesn't seem ever to have done that."

"Captain, you're the most persuasive person I know." Out of the corner of his eye, Tamas saw Uhura put on a Spock face, and knew she was trying not to smile. "Would you come down and try to talk the Head of the family out of this idea of overthrowing the Emperor? I know I got myself into this mess, but I don't seem to be able to get out of it alone."

"Honey, everyone here's gotten themselves into situations they couldn't get themselves out of. That's why starships hold more than one person."

Tamas looked around and saw that Uhura was right. Kirk was smiling gently, encouragingly; McCoy seemed to be remembering; and Spock's eyes were far away, though his face was still. They all knew about mistakes, and were used to helping one another out of them. Unconsciously, she sighed in relief, and Uhura smiled sympathetically.

"It's too late to go down there now," said Kirk, "but in the morning, you can beam down and ask permission for us to come. Maybe we'll bring this Head up to the Enterprise, and show him some of our war holos. Or the Medical Records department might interest him, right Bones?"

"I've got pictures that ought to make a Klingon swear off war, Jim."

"The difficulty, however," said Spock, "lies less in the Head's innocence of war's horrors than in his belief that war is impossible. We must attempt to show him that war may be the result of his actions, and we must do it without any certainty that our position is correct. It is, after all, possible that Sirath has truly gone beyond war."

"Do you think that it has, Spock?"

"I do not, Captain, but my data is insufficient for certainty. The Sirathians appear to be very like Earth Humans, differing only in their leadership and, slightly, in appearance. It seems probable that their behavior in the absence of a settled government would parallel that which has always been observed on Earth -- armed conflict leading to seizure of power by a strong group."

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"By our standards, Visitors," the Head said the next day, over a snack of various tidbits wrapped in leaves, "this is a very modern farming operation. We have as yet few of the Federation's innovations, however. One thing we intend to acquire soon is a transporter. It is a heavy expense, but very useful for harvest and for moving animals when the roads become impassible, which they do. Our rains are infrequent but heavy, and the dust becomes mud with great regularity and alarming speed."

"A cargo transporter, then -- it'd have to be a pretty good size," commented McCoy. "Or could you get by with a personal-sized one, and make more trips?"

"No, the energy expense is even heavier than the initial outlay. The fewer trips, the cheaper it is. We could not, for example, use the transporter to carry people to the city except in an emergency; the cost would be much too great."

"You used one on us," said Kirk sharply.

"That, Captain, was an emergency. It involved quite a long trip to my birth-family home, where my birth-kin were persuaded to leave me alone in their transporter room and ask no questions. We paid for the energy, of course."

Uhura was intrigued. "Weren't you born here, Head?"

"No. My wife -- excuse me, did that word translate? It means a lifelong mate of the other sex."

"Yes," said Kirk, "we have that relationship also."

"My wife was born here; she was the Head of the family, until she died. I believe there is much feeling that I should have married again, preferably within the family, and produced children. But I never could bring myself to do so. I named my nephew as my heir -- the son of my wife's sister. You have met him -- he

is bringing the children back to the palace. He is a good man, and his mother is a good woman. But my wife was unique. There is no one like her now in the world. It was she who thought that Sirath would be better without an Emperor. I was a coward in those days; the very idea of a world without the Immortal Emperor was enough to make me tremble. I am braver now, since I have lived through her death."

Temas felt a kinship to this man. Everyone was silent, until Kirk's communicator beeped. "Kirk here."

The chief engineer's voice, distinctive though faint, came from the communicator. "Captain, we've received a verrra strange message from the palace."

With a look around the circle, Kirk said, "Put it on." The Emperor's voice was heard.

"Captain Kirk, a most serious situation has arisen. The children who were transported away with you have not been returned as was promised. Instead, we have received a letter threatening their lives. The price asked is the resignation of the Emperor and his exile to another planet. Captain, could your ship carry me to another habitable planet?"

"Patch me in to the Emperor, Scotty." The response was almost immediate.

"Captain, this is the Emperor. Did you receive my message?"

"Emperor, do nothing. We can take you, if that becomes necessary, but do nothing now. We may be able to get the children back safely."

The Emperor hesitated.

"Please, sir," continued the captain, "we have brought this trouble upon you. I would like us to be the ones to repair the damage. You may have to resign, but don't do it just now."

"All right, Captain, I will follow your advice, for a little while. For two or three days, I will not resign. Unless, of course, there is some change in the situation. But I am very much frightened for those babies."

"Yes, sir. So am I."

"You've made up your mind, Captain," said Temas.

"Yes, I have. Haven't you?"

"I guess I have. Threatening babies doesn't appeal to me." She looked around the circle, saw Uhura and McCoy in full agreement. The Head had quietly disappeared.

"Spock?" said Kirk.

"Captain, the Emperor is powerful, but benevolent and reluctant to use his power. This young man seems anxious to use all the power he can, no matter how acquired. It would be illogical for us to assist him to more."

"But," said the Head, walking back into the room, "he does not want power. None of us do. We want the absence of power, so that people can be free. Your ship's report was accurate, Captain. I felt obliged to have it checked by my own people. I don't know how he thinks his actions will help us, but it seems that Jeyan has indeed captured the children and demanded the Imperial throne. I am sure, however, that he would not hurt the children for any reason."

"Spock, you try," said Kirk, with a helpless wave of a hand.

"Head, your relatives did not understand that there is no such thing as the absence of power. Political power, like energy, is neither created nor destroyed, merely relocated. The type of society you have imagined is one in power is divided fairly evenly among all the people; such a society is quite feasible. Many Federation planets have such societies. However, they were not formed by accident, nor by nature. The most careful plans are necessary to maintain such a precarious balance of power, with provisions for counteracting the natural tendency for someone or some group to seize control."

"That's what I told your buddies, but they wouldn't listen. If you leave a vacuum, you get chaos, followed by tyranny. Not democracy," said McCoy.

"Please," said Kirk, leaning toward the Head. "Help us find your nephew before he harms the children. His plan can't work, and it wouldn't be beneficial if it did. Would you have people say that they were led to freedom by kidnappers and murderers?"

"No," said the Head, but it was at Uhura he looked.

"Please," she said. "Children!"

"The children are in no real danger," said the Head. "I am sure of that."

"On our planet," she replied, "people who are truly sure rarely say so. 'I am sure,' often means, 'I wish to be sure'."

He laughed suddenly and delightedly. "No one since the death of my wife has corrected me so thoroughly. I am really almost certain that no harm will come to the children. Jeyan had money to use the public transporter. He knows the desert area around here very well, as he was born and reared here. But I may know it better than he thinks. I have spent many hours walking over the land in the last years. Whether my knowledge equals that of one who was a boy here, I don't know. He will be handicapped, or perhaps helped, by the season."

"It's pira berry time!" Tamas burst out. "I'd forgotten all about it. Captain, the desert will be full of people -- family groups, mostly -- come to pick the pira berries. Sirathians make whole meals of them at this time of year."

"Then it will be hard for Jeyan to hide in the desert," said Uhura.

"But," said Tamas, "he'll be inconspicuous among the family groups -- just a father or uncle and four children."

"If I were a strong young man, trying to hide four children and keep them quiet, I would hide in the pira berry bushes. True, it is not a new idea, but then Jeyan is not a man of many new ideas. He has always to be shown; then, he holds to the idea as the bushes themselves hold to their water."

"These bushes must be very large," said Uhura.

"Come and see," said the Head, rising. "We will need water bottles, Captain. The family can lend you some. And we will pack a meal. Overnight gear, I think, will not be necessary."

"Thank you, Head. I must tell my ship what we are doing."

While the captain checked in with Scott, Tamas spoke quietly to Uhura. "Everyone seems rather casual about this, but suppose we find we need to stay out longer than we expect? Shouldn't we carry some more supplies than they're considering?"

Uhura looked surprised. "Honey, did you forget we have a whole starship on our shoulders?" Tamas was still puzzled. "If we need anything, they can beam it down, silly. It's the galaxy's biggest backpack. We take what we think we'll need, of course -- transporting isn't free -- but what we haven't got, we can get."

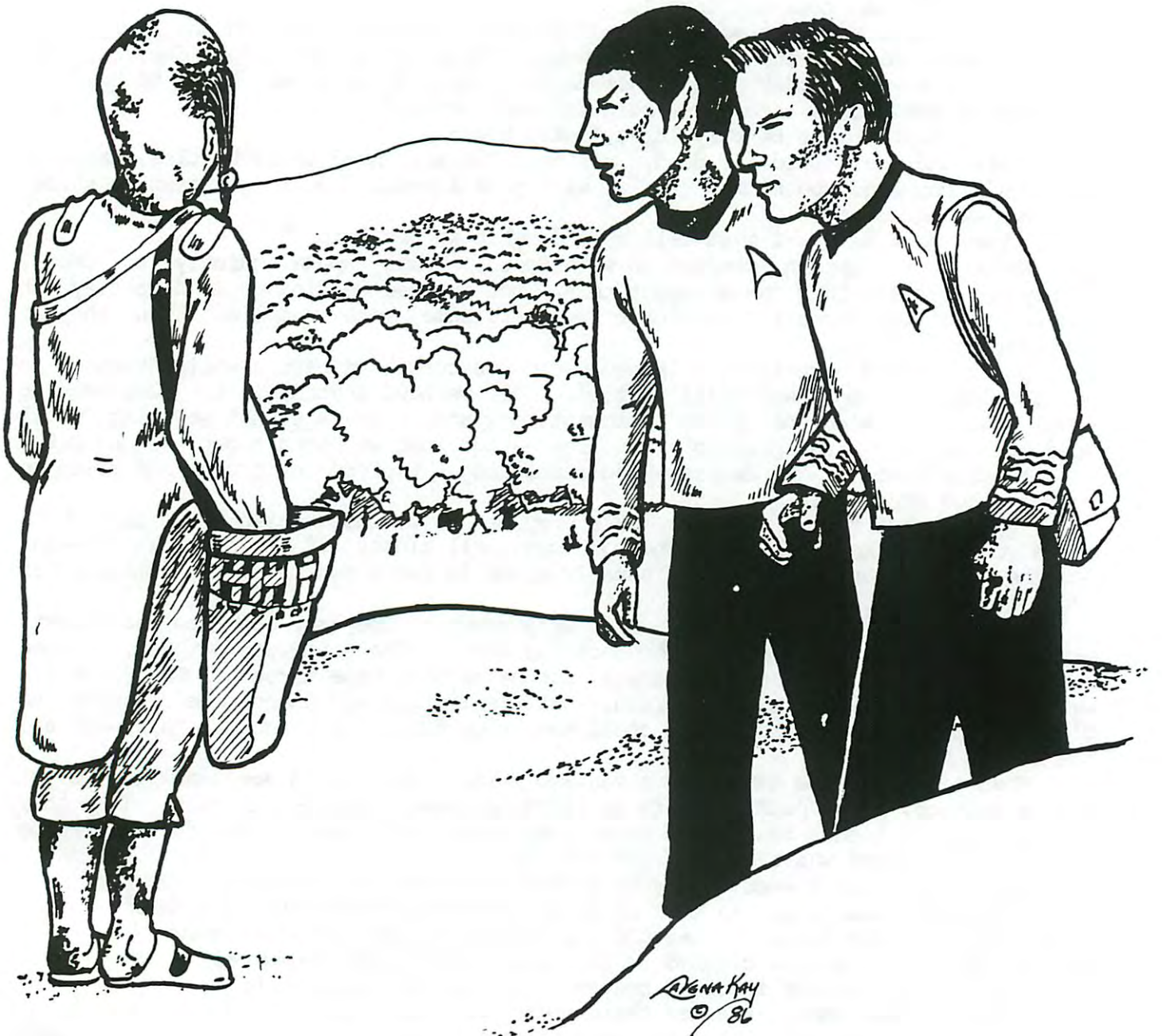
Tamas blinked. "Of course. How reassuring. Explore in luxury, and sleep in your own bed at night!"

"By the same token, though, it's very bad if we lose contact with the ship. Makes you feel like a baby with the cord cut, all alone, if you see what I mean. And the exploration parties don't usually sleep in their own beds; you'd miss a lot that way."

The captain and the food and water were ready. They set off into the desert, a yellow, dusty, rocky place where nothing grew. The going was not bad, uneven underfoot, with a lot of ups and downs, but no sand to wade through. The Sirathian was more accustomed to the terrain, but the Terrans had knees more adapted to climbing up and down. The Vulcan could have been strolling through a park, for all the effort he showed.

When a little rise gave them a vantage point, they could see small groups of people walking, some pushing carts or riding on small motored vehicles. Then they saw a clump of bushes that would have looked small and close if not for the people near it. The clump was far away, and very large.

When they came closer, they could see that the clump covered several acres. The bushes were enormous, as tall as trees and tangled together in a dense mass a short way into the foliage. Around the outside ranged the families who had come for the berries. People climbed to pick them, sat to eat them, called to children who were going too far into the bushes. One or two families had brought tents. The bushes, Tamas knew, reached their roots deep into underground reservoirs, and burst into fruit for several weeks every Sirathian year. A slight breeze brought



the heavenly scent of the berries to her, and on impulse she swarmed up into a bush to fill her hands, then slid down, rumped, and distributed a few to each member of their party.

"Do you have anything like this on Earth?" asked the Head, watching Uhura's obvious appreciation.

"No, Head, this is delicious. But we have some things I wish you could try in exchange."

"What things, Uhura?" Tamas asked curiously.

"Um, mangoes. Oranges. Sweet corn with butter."

"Raspberries warm from the sun," said Tamas. "Morels. I see what you mean. But pira berries taste of childhood to me, and it's been a long time between berry seasons, Uhura." Tamas was up in the bush again as she spoke, gathering all the berries she could hold. "Lunch, Captain," she called. "Pira berries are food and drink."

"Now, hold on there," said McCoy. "Food and drink for the Sirathians, maybe, but we with Earth stomachs should look out. An entire meal of berries might not sit too well, if you know what I mean."

"Do you have your medkit, Doctor?"

"You know I do."

"Then I'll risk it. Head, give me your bag and I'll gather enough for both of us."

Kirk seemed about to speak, then shrugged and was silent. The Head handed his bag to Tamas, and Spock quietly to Uhura. "Will you not eat with us, Lieutenant?"

"I'll have a few more berries, but I'd better listen to what the doctor says, and not make a whole meal of them."

"That's right, Lieutenant," Kirk threw in, in a meaningful voice. Tamas thought he sounded as if he needed to assert his authority, and Uhura looked somewhat surprised. She smiled at the Captain.

"Yes, sir. You see, Head, I must follow orders."

"But the Recorder need not? You said she was not a member of your crew."

Tamas picked industriously.

"No, she isn't. She's a passenger only, and while on the planet's surface, she's not subject to the captain's orders."

"But on the ship?"

"There, yes, she is. A ship can't be run as a democratic government. It's too small, and the dangers are too great. There's nowhere for the disaffected to go, you see, so we can't afford to have any. The crew must be a unit in order to function."

Tamas, listening, glanced involuntarily at the captain. He was looking soberly at her. Much as she disliked appearing to give in, she couldn't fault Uhura's reasoning. With a small sigh, she handed her bag of berries to the Head and sat to eat her lunch with the others. She saw a suspicion of amusement on the captain's face; but before she could take offense, he was smiling directly at her, with so much understanding and good-humor that her irritation vanished. It was a beautiful day.

♦♦♦

Their exploration of the pira berry bush, however, was useless. They spread out and climbed here and there, keeping in touch by communicators, their only accomplishment was the conclusion that the bush was very large and very disorienting. If Jeyan was hiding in there, he could stay away from them for a week.

Tamas thought the climbing an enjoyable change, though she knew her muscles would ache the next day. She enjoyed the rich scent of the berries, and the green coolness of the interior of the bush. But she saw and heard nothing but Enterprise crew. They were all, she thought, a bit discouraged. The night was beginning when they gave up the search for Jeyan, and Kirk called the ship.

"Scotty."

"Aye, sir."

"Beam us up, Scotty, but beam the Head back to his compound first."

"I thank you, Captain," said the Head, and was gone in a shimmering light. A minute later, Sirath's desert was gone, too.

As the party materialized, they heard the bridge calling to the Captain. Kirk was at the communicator instantly.

"Kirk here."

"The Emperor wishes to speak to you, Captain."

"Put him on the screen."

The Emperor's face looked small and somehow forlorn on the tiny screen in the transporter room.

"Captain, I have just received some news -- I must tell you." He seemed to struggle to speak coherently. "One of the children who was taken -- a little boy, the older of the two boys -- his name is Latif -- he has been found--"

A broad smile was forming on McCoy's face.

"Found!" said Kirk, letting out his breath, "then why--"

"Dead, Captain; he has been found dead."

Chapter 13

"Emperor, I must speak with you. May I join you?"

"Certainly, Captain. Now, if you like."

Moments later, Kirk was gone, and the rest of the party had scattered to quarters or duty stations.

Though Sirathian afternoon, it had been ship's evening when they beamed aboard. Well into ship's night, all the corridors were dimmed when Tamas was roused from less than satisfactory sleep. She sat up and listened, unable to determine what had wakened her. Giving up on sleep as a bad job, she dressed and went for a walk along the corridors. Her random steps took her past the briefing room. She didn't know why she went to the door, but when it opened, she found the lights on and the room occupied. Spock and McCoy were there, with the captain and -- looking as comfortable as in his palace -- the Immortal Emperor.

As the door opened, the captain sighed with half a smile, and gestured to a chair. "If you don't object, Emperor?"

"Not at all. The Recorder and I are old friends." The Emperor's smile was warm and welcoming. Tamas sat down and listened. "We have been discussing a plan to retrieve my unfortunate babies. I have arranged to leave with the Enterprise but to be honest, I hope that will not be necessary. I cannot believe that Jeyan would be a responsible Emperor, and I have been much exercised over whether I have the right to turn my people over to him even to protect the children."

"Indeed," said Spock, "Jeyan has not demonstrated any noticeable capacity for leadership. But one of those children, I believe, is your replacement."

"Correct, Commander. But all of them are my children. I have a duty to them all."

"What are you going to do?" asked Tamas.

The Emperor turned to the captain.

"The Emperor and I are going to beam down to the planet's surface together, in the hopes of being able to meet with and talk to Jeyan. It is evening there now, but in the morning --"

It might work, Tamas was thinking; perhaps they could persuade Jeyan --

Her thoughts and the captain's words were interrupted by a buzz from the bridge. "Captain Kirk, Captain Kirk."

"Kirk here. What is it, Chekov?"

"You told us to monitor the pira berry bushes, especially that huge clump. We're getting a Sirathian reading from inside it, sir."

"How deep inside? Is it just someone picking berries?"

"No, sir, I don't think so. It's very far inside, sir."

"Relay the coordinates to the transporter room, Chekov. Transporter room!"

Lock on and beam up! Security, to the transporter room. Emperor, this way." Spock and McCoy followed as a matter of course, and only later did Tamas wonder if, as a passenger, she should have retreated to her cabin. At the time it seemed inevitable that she should follow, too. They were in the transporter room in minutes. On the platform was Jeyan, while two red shirted security people guarded him with phasers.

He looked surprisingly unruffled. He was not dressed in indoor robes, but wore work clothes -- dark, smooth-knitted pants and shirt that allowed free movement without catching on tools or branches. He stood easily, blue eyes alert in the blue face, his hair gathered in three braids, very practical.

"Get off the platform, Jeyan," said Kirk. "You've given us a fair amount of trouble, you know."

Jeyan stepped down with a royal air. "I have not made you free with my name," he remarked. "You may call me Emperor."

"I believe this planet already has an Emperor. Two would be crowding it."

"Kidnapper," said the Emperor, "You want me to give up my position to you. But I have come to believe that I am not privileged to give my position away. And I am very sure that the people will not accept you as their Emperor."

"They may not, at first," said Jeyan. "But as the years pass by, and parents are succeeded by children, and I am still there ... Eventually, they will be reconciled. I will do such things for them! I will build such monuments, finance such voyages, plant such colonies! They will be reconciled, in time."

"In time! Do you intend to live forever?"

"Tamas, get out!" Kirk said suddenly. Tamas' body obeyed the command voice immediately, and she found herself outside before she had a chance to wonder why. She stood in the corridor for a moment, feeling foolish, but not foolish enough to go back in the transporter room. That had definitely been an order. Before she could decide what to do, a security yeoman came around the curve in the bulkhead.

"Come with me, Miss Renarde," she said. She led Tamas to her cabin, where the yeoman pushed a few buttons on the communications board. The captain's voice came over the intercom.

"--allow you to speak to anyone on my ship."

"However, Captain," (it was Jeyan's voice) "though you may not give me the Recorder, yet you cannot hold me here, as long as I am the only one who knows where the children are. I am sure you would not want them to perish for lack of food and drink."

There came a growl in McCoy's unmistakable tones, something like, "mister" or "monster." Tamas' own frustration was considerable. She wished she could enlighten Jeyan on some of the methods used by her ancestors to get information out of people. Jeyan stood there in his blue-and-brown innocence, with no idea of how easily the children's location could be gotten from him. Only the self-imposed restraints of the Federation made Jeyan's position tenable, but he didn't know that, or understand that they were more civilized than he. Then his voice came through again.

"Doctor, you sound appalled. And yet it was you who gave me the idea."

"Me!"

"All of you, but you especially, Doctor. You helped me to see that to overthrow the Emperor was not enough --that some strong person must take charge afterwards. Otherwise, chaos. I am very grateful to you. Now, Captain, if I were in your position, I would let the children die, and protect the throne. After all, aren't the lives of all the people on the planet more important than those of a few children? But false sentiment is the great weakness of your planet, as of mine; and that I lack it is my strength."

"You see, Captain," came the Emperor's voice, "we have on Sirath a certain number of people like this--moral imbeciles. They seem unreachable and unteachable. Have you any such on your planet?"

McCoy answered the Emperor. "Yes. We've been able to reduce their number, but not eliminate them entirely."

"On Vulcan," said Spock, "such a person would be insane by definition, and would be confined for treatment and for the protection of others."

Temas heard a strange screech, apparently from Jeyan, and then an unfamiliar high, mechanical noise.

"Catch him!" said Kirk. "Put him on the platform and beam him down near the bushes you got him from. Check with the bridge for coordinates. Emperor, he doesn't seem amenable to reason."

"No, Captain." There was a silence. "Would you please have me put down near my palace? I confess to feeling most tired and somewhat discouraged."

"Of course." Then there was silence, except for the transporter engineer's questions to the bridge, and the transporter whine. Temas was still sitting at the desk when her door buzzer sounded.

"Come."

"Did you hear, Temas?"

"Every word, Jim. What was the idea of getting rid of me, though?"

"Easier to get you away first than to get you back after."

Temas let out her breath on a smile of comprehension.

"Not only does he think you know how to discredit the Emperor, but he's taken it into his head that you have the Fountain of Youth. He's convinced himself that you know the secret of the Emperor's immortality and can pass it along to him. I'm glad you left right away; that is a very dangerous man."

"But, he's insane."

"You have led a sheltered life, haven't you? I have to get going." He bent to kiss her. "I want to talk a minute with Bones, just sort of make sure he's all right. You heard what Jeyan said about where he got the idea. It hit Bones pretty hard."

"The jobs of a starship captain are many and varied, I see. But it's nonsense, of course, to think that without our cram course in history, Jeyan would never have come up with his bright ideas. He was destined to be trouble, that one."

"Are you sure?"

"I haven't any evidence, Jim, if that's what you mean. But I'm sure. I feel it in my bones when he talks. Don't you?"

"Your feelings are on a firmer basis than mine, Temas; McCoy tested you himself, and he knows your ESP rating is unusually high."

"Oh, he did, and he does? Funny no one told me about it."

"Spoils the test. Especially with someone like you, who isn't thrilled with the idea of ESP in the first place. But believe me, Bones will pay more attention to your feelings about Jeyan than to all the logical arguments Spock could think up."

•••

It was late in the next ship's "day" that Temas went to the bridge in search of the captain.

"Jim, could I talk to you? And to Spock, too?"

"Now?"

"If it's convenient."

"It isn't very convenient, Temas."

She said nothing, only looked at him.

"All right." He walked over to the wall communicator. "Mr. Spock, can you meet me in the briefing room?"

"On my way, Captain."

Outside the briefing room they found Uhura, apparently loitering in the corridor. "Captain...", said Temas.

"Do I look that gullible, Temas? Come on in, Lieutenant, if you're off duty and you want to. Is there anyone else you want, Miss Renarde? Doctor McCoy? Nurse Chapel? Scotty and a band of pipers?"

"I told you," said Uhura quietly, as she seated herself next to Temas. She looked embarrassed, and Temas felt the discussion had begun on the wrong note. The

captain and first officer seated themselves, the first officer flipped on the computer, and they were ready to begin.

"Actually, Captain, Nurse Chapel might be useful," said Tamas with an assumption of ease that she didn't feel. "But I talked to her before, so I already know her opinion," she added hastily, before the captain could do more than take a breath. "She thinks that what I have in mind is quite feasible from a medical angle."

"Would it be too much, Miss Renarde, to ask what it is that you do have in mind? Without," he held up a hand, "without any careful preparations, or background explanations."

"I want to be inoculated with measles and Azametine flu."

"Out of the question."

"You said, no background or explanation. May I give that now?"

Kirk glanced at Spock, who inclined his head slightly. "As long as we're here, then. What gave you such a harebrained idea?"

Temas relaxed and let out a breath. "Harebrained. If you really think that, I have a chance. You have a reputation for backing harebrained ideas and making them work."

"Flattery will get you nowhere, Miss Renarde." Kirk seemed to relax, and to shrug off his irritation like a badly fitting coat. He leaned back and prepared to listen.

"When my husband caught this Azametine flu, almost the first symptom he exhibited was an increase in cerebral activity. He was able to do things with his mind -- to solve problems that he'd never even seen before. When Doctor McCoy got it, he quickly isolated the virus that caused it, even though he'd been working unsuccessfully before he got sick. Now. You tell me that Doctor McCoy has confirmed what Mr. Spock thought -- that I am a natural telepath, a very rare thing among Humans. It seems possible that, having been infected with the two viruses concerned, whatever telepathic abilities I have would be magnified. Perhaps I could influence Jeyan to give up the children."

There was silence in the briefing room. Kirk broke it by asking, "Where do you come in, Uhura?"

"I seem to be an expert witness, Captain. I am the only one who has been subjected to the -- persuasive -- force of Tamas' mind."

"And you found it very persuasive indeed."

"As you know, Captain. But I had no sense of an outside agency pressing on me, just a feeling of absolute urgency. It seemed so evident that Tamas was in trouble, that I couldn't understand why everyone didn't see it. It was so plain -- once, Captain, I saw you when you were in trouble. This wasn't visual, but it was as clear as that, and as frustrating when I wasn't believed. If Jeyan were subjected to that, magnified... It might work, Captain."

"Spock, what do you think?"

"I would like to know why Doctor McCoy is not here, Captain. A medical opinion would be more useful in the circumstances."

Kirk turned to Tamas. "Captain, I did ask Chris. But I thought Doctor McCoy would be so against me that I'd never get a chance to be heard."

"Illogical," said Spock. "You must have known that his approval would be necessary. Even the captain cannot order the chief medical officer to violate his medical judgment."

This was an unpleasant revelation to Tamas. She'd hoped to go around McCoy, somehow, as she had very little confidence that he would approve. "I didn't know that, as a matter of fact, but now that I do, I can see the necessity. However, if you, Mr. Spock, agree that my idea is worth trying, and if you, Captain, agree to try it, you could talk to the doctor, couldn't you? Remember, there are children at stake, and the future of Sirath as well."

"Lieutenant Uhura, what's your opinion?"

"Captain, I think she should be allowed to try. If it works, the benefits are incalculable, and if it doesn't, we can beam her up and cure her. At least -- we

can cure her, can't we?"

"Chris thinks so," said Tamas. "The course of the illness should be more predictable and controllable than it was in the other two cases, since this one will be deliberately induced."

"Spock?"

"The data are so incomplete that I am reluctant to attempt a projection of the risks versus benefits, Captain. However, the danger to the children that Jeyan is holding would appear to be very great. And one of the children is necessary to preserve the peace of Sirath."

Tamas could see Kirk thinking, and knew that there would be no appeal from this decision. She looked down at her hands in her lap, afraid of distracting him with her stare. And all the time, a small part of her was screaming, What have you done? Are you insane? You could die down there!

Kirk looked up almost as soon as she looked down. "Hmm, we were ordered to help Miss Renarde as long as we are in the vicinity of Sirath. Tamas, I don't think it will work, but I think we'll help you try. I'll talk to Bones about it. Dismissed, everyone." He reached forward and turned off the recorder.

"Spock, I'm going to Sickbay in about five minutes. Meet me there. Uhura, I'll return your sister to you a bit later." Kirk walked with Tamas to her cabin, and came inside without waiting for an invitation. Tamas knew it wasn't five minutes of dalliance he had on his mind, but what it was, she had no idea.

He settled himself comfortable on the chair, leaving her to sit on the bed. "Tamas, we're going to talk to Doctor McCoy. Now, I may not be able to persuade him to approve this crazy idea. He may be unalterably opposed, or there may be some medical hitch that Chris didn't think of. But if I don't talk to him, you won't have a chance."

"You have a condition to impose, don't you Jim?"

"Yes. A big one. I want you to put yourself under my command for the duration of this scheme. Until you are back and well, I want you to obey me. Instantly. Unquestionably. I will not lend my aid or my ship's aid to you under any other circumstances."

"But, Jim, part of the trouble now is that I swore kinship with the Sogut family. You want me to compound the error!"

"I want," he said slowly and clearly, "to be able to trust you, Tamas, as I would trust one of my crew. You pointed out, down there, that you are not part of the crew, and you were right. But I cannot and will not sanction your plan unless I can rely on your obedience."

"Otherwise?"

"Otherwise, I'll go myself. I'm still not sure this idea of yours is any good, you know. Legally, I have no right to ask your obedience, and certainly I have no means to enforce it. But I am asking."

"Demanding, you mean. Your way or not at all."

"That's right."

"Your way, then. I will obey you, Captain."

"Let's get to Sickbay, then."

They walked silently to the lift, and stood silently in it. He's damned arrogant, Tamas was thinking. A controller.

When they left the lift, Kirk said, "Something on your mind?"

"At least you didn't try to sweet-talk me into it," she said. "One small point in your favor, Captain."

Spock was already in Sickbay, and McCoy was already irritated.

"What's going on, Jim? Spock says you told him to meet you here, but he won't say why. Just stands around getting on my nerves."

"Bones, Tamas has come up with a way -- possibly -- to get those children away from Jeyan before he kills them all."

"I'm all ears."

By the time it was over, Tamas thought he was at least as much mouth. He thought of every possible objection, from medical ("I'm a doctor, not a voodoo witch

— I heal people; I don't make them sick!") to moral ("You're just going to reach in and change the man's mind for him! Where I grew up, they called that thought control!")

"No, Doctor, I'm not going to change his mind; I'm only hoping to stop him from killing the children. No different than getting a hold on his arm from behind, right?"

Finally, Kirk asked Spock to predict the chances of success. "Approximately twenty-three point two percent, Captain."

"Temas has agreed, unofficially, to put herself under my command."

"Forty-eight point three percent, then, Captain." Temas started. Even Kirk looked surprised.

"Bones, how long to prepare the infection?"

"The quickest way would be to use me as a donor. It's not measles we need, but just the Azametine virus, mutated as it does when in contact with the remaining effects of measles in the spine. Pack a bag, Temas, and I'll be ready when you get back."

As Temas changed and prepared, she wondered just what she was doing and why. The main thing was to get the children away from Jeyan, the second thing, to preserve the Emperor's position. There was no way to locate a small group of Sirathians on a planet full of Sirathians. Jeyan had been found and beamed up, a feat which had done no good at all. But he had demonstrated a definite wish to capture Temas. Requiring the Emperor to stand down was all very well, but only she knew how to discredit him in the eyes of the populace. Not that Jeyan knew that, but he did know she had something, some knowledge that would end the long Imperial reign. And he appeared to believe that she knew the secret of immortality. He wanted that; he wanted it very much. If he knew she was there, wouldn't he come after her.

Part of Temas thought he wouldn't, and part of her was glad. Part of her thought the whole idea was silly and totally uninteresting. This, she knew, was the part that was truly terrified. And part of her went on braiding her hair and rolling it up out of the way, washing face and hands, programming comfortable pants, shirt, and shoes. Food. Should she stop by the mess hall? She decided to go to Sickbay and ask the captain, if he were still there. If she didn't go now, she couldn't be sure her courage would last.

Courage? Is this what courage feels like? God deliver me from cowardice!

In Sickbay, McCoy seemed determined to torture her.

"Are you sure of this, Temas?" he asked. She nodded angrily. She would have preferred to be waylaid as she was coming in, and hypoed without a chance to back out. But the result was the same; the result was what counted.

"You'll meet in the transporter room. Supplies are being sent down now," said McCoy.

"Meet?" Temas said sharply, "Meet who?"

"The other members of the landing party, of course. Did you think you were going alone?"

"Of course I thought I was going alone! What good will it do to have other people along?"

"Do you want me to explain, or shall we stand here and snipe at each other?"

Temas dropped into a convenient chair, her shoulders slumping. "I'm sorry, Bones. When you've nerved yourself up to do something grand and heroic, it's hard to hear that it isn't quite as grand and heroic as you thought." She forced a smile. "Even if it is a little less frightening."

"Now you've got me frightened. There's to be no heroism, do you hear? Maybe everything will work out as planned, and maybe not, but remember that the best thing would be for this Jeyan to surrender himself and the children before you get down there at all. Then we could cure you and never find out whether telepathy is influenced by this virus. That would be the best thing, do you understand? No heroics, no risk -- the easy way out."

"Okay, Doctor."

"'Bones' was all right. I'm used to it." He reached out a hand to help her up. Spock called you Leonard, she thought suddenly.

"No! When?" he asked, and then let go of her hand like a hot potato. "It's started, Tamas! You didn't say that aloud, did you?"

"No," she said, putting her hand on his arm, suddenly fully aware and more terrified than ever. He flinched.

"Lord, don't touch me! Try to think pleasant thoughts, Tamas, and don't touch anyone, do you hear? If it's that bad -- well, no use now. But I'm coming down and staying with you as long as I can. The other symptoms should be showing themselves soon. Now, come."

In the transporter room were Kirk, Uhura, and two security men. Tamas knew one of them slightly. Swinburne, that was his name. She nodded and tried to smile, but the arrow of pity she felt from him gave her no hope that she had succeeded. She avoided Uhura's eyes, and Kirk's, but she heard Kirk's voice.

"You're coming along, Bones?"

"Yes, I--"

"Good, let's go."

Chapter 14

They were on Sirath, in a large open area of pebbles and yellow dirt, with no vegetation in sight. A short walk brought them to a small hill, from the top of which they could see, very close, the giant pira berry bushes.

"Well, here you are, Tamas. Too late to turn back, now. Let me give you a shot of stimulant. It isn't good for you, but I guess it's better than letting you fall down in a coma. I'm going to give you some of this stuff to take with you." He handed her a belt case, containing two hypos. "They're all loaded and ready to shoot. It has to be in the this form -- oral medicine doesn't work fast enough for what you might need. Now, any fool can give a hypo; ask Spock, if you don't believe me. Don't use it if you don't need it."

"Remember," said Kirk, "we'll have sensors on you every minute. When we see you with four Sirathians, we'll beam you up."

McCoy gave her the hypo with great care, not touching her. Kirk looked at them strangely, and reached towards Tamas' arm.

"I wouldn't do that, Jim," she warned. "The doctor didn't like it when he did."

"Oh?" Kirk paused, then grasped her arm anyway. He drew in his breath suddenly, closed his eyes and held on for an instant, then let go. "Yes, well, I see what you mean, Bones." His eyes looked thoughtful.

"You've probably never felt such abject terror as that in your entire life, have you, Jim?" she asked, managing a laugh. "Well, new experience is always valuable."

"Pay attention, Tamas," he said gently as, over her protests, he took both her hands in his. For a moment she didn't understand, but then she put aside her own fear and reached out for the emotions that were coming from him. Her stomach tightened. The captain had no reason for the physical fear that Tamas felt, but he was knotted up with anxiety for her and what she was to do. He wished desperately to be going with her, or instead of her. He let go of her hands, with a slight, embarrassed smile.

"Every time, Jim?" she asked.

"Every time. Spock says I don't do as much delegating as I ought to; you can see why not."

Tamas could not but wonder why he had exposed his feelings so. He was occasionally impulsive, she knew, but this didn't appear to be an impulse. But what purpose --? She saw him looking closely at her. Then she got it, and smiled at him. "You don't have to be afraid I'll go off on my own, Jim. Really. I gave my word and I'll keep it. Not just for your sake, but for the word's."

"It never hurts to be sure. Now, Tamas, you have supplies for a day or so only. If you don't find him by then, we'll beam you up. Leave your communicator open at all times. We'll have someone monitoring you from the ship. Also, we'll have sensors on you, so we'll still be able to trace you, even if he takes your communicator away. Dr. McCoy used to fix us up with intradermal transponders -- but he's turned stingy lately --"

"Jim, you know I can't prescribe those things after what happened on Thutmose Aleph!"

"Anyway, you'll be the only Human on the planet, Tamas -- you'll be our tracer body. He comes to the bushes every night, and we pick him up; but as soon as he joins up with other Sirathians, we lose him. You'll be our tracer; where you are, he is, and I hope the children are also. Don't go wandering off in the desert, or join a group, if you can help it. Just go in the bushes, and stay there, and wait for him to find you. Then try to reach his mind; maybe you can get him to give up easily. No violence -- do you understand? You're just not trained enough and he's bigger than you.

"You're worrying again, Jim."

"Of course he is," said McCoy. "He's not a fool."

"No fighting, Tamas."

"Wait, Jim. What if he does something to the children? Still no fighting? I don't intend to break my word, but I'm not sure I could hold still..."

She caught a sudden scent of exasperation leavened with amusement, as if an oven door had opened in Kirk's mind.

"Bones, Starfleet needs a new publicity department. Is that what people really think of us, Tamas? That we turn people into robots? Of course you may defend the children, if the necessity arises, and yourself, too. All I'm saying is, don't ask for trouble. Because you probably couldn't handle it. Try to find another way."

"That's certainly fair enough, Jim. I assure you, I will be careful. I'm far more likely to be over-cautious than reckless. See you later, Jim, Bones."

She set out alone for the bushes, not looking back. When she heard the transporter whine, her shoulders slumped slightly, then she set them and continued.

♦♦♦

It was quiet around the bushes. Most of the berry pickers had gone home, and those that remained were settling down for the night. Small fires warmed the camps, and some people talked in low voices. Tamas knew that they could see her better than she could them; she had no thought of hiding, but circled the bushes slowly, as if looking for her party. When she found an empty expanse, she slipped inside, and began to climb upward and inward.

The smell of the leaves was sharper at night, and the dark inside soon became almost impenetrable. She felt her way along step by step, and uncovered her light before she was sure she had gone far enough. If it attracted the attention of the berry pickers, Jeyan might shy away. The light awakened a sextet of roosting birds, the tiny thegnets of Sirath that live all year round in the pira berry bushes. Their thin cries and fluttering wings startled Tamas. But she heard no voices, saw no people. She continued, going in no particular direction but upwards, unable to tell which way led in to the center. The branches were as slippery as in the daytime; the attention that was required to keep going took her mind off her fear. She climbed, pushing her way through tangles and branches, for what seemed a long time.

After a while she found herself pushing aside not living, green branches, but dead, brittle sticks. They didn't look very different from the living branches in the greenish chemical light, but cracked and broke as she went through. A few minutes later, she came out into a comparatively empty place. The footing was not as good, and there was no place to sit except for forks of branches, no mats of entwined branched below. But there was open air above, so she could stand up without pushing the bush aside.

She stopped to breathe for awhile, wondering if she were developing a mild



claustrophobia. Three breaths, and she became aware of a feeling of wariness, certainly appropriate to her situation, but bearing a strange flavor. It was like smelling herself and finding that she smelled like someone else. Cautiously, she studied the feeling. Wariness certainly -- care, but not fear. But she was afraid. She had been afraid for hours and hours now, and nothing had happened to make her brave. Then she found her fear, with a gut-grabbing wrench, and saw that it was quite different and separate from the wariness. She tasted that again. Under the sensation was urgency, and a ravenous desire, not of the flesh but of the spirit. A wanting so strong that she could associate it in her own privileged life only with sex, but unconnected with anything of the body. A feeling totally knew to her, and as unpleasant in its way as the fear with which she was more familiar.

And her fear took on a new and sickening intensity as she realized that the emotions she was feeling weren't her own. Someone was nearby concealed by the foliage, but certainly very close. It must be Jeyan. She shone her light around, and saw nothing. If killing her was in his mind, this was a good opportunity. Even if she turned off the light, he would be able to see her with his infrared sensitive eyes. But he wasn't thinking of killing her, she thought. She couldn't catch his thoughts, only his feelings, but surely murderous intent would show in the emotions? Or would it?

Should she call out to him? No, you idiot, she thought, suddenly furious with herself. What did you come down here for, anyway? To find the children, and get him to give them up, right? She closed her eyes, and tried to link up with Jeyan's mind. She let herself feel all his lust, all his hunger for ... for power -- that was it; he wanted power! She was astonished at the strength of his desire; she had herself enjoyed strength and independence, but this hunger for control over others was foreign to her; she hadn't entirely believed it existed. Strong, strong -- her eyes snapped open. And Jeyan was there.

He was standing easily on a wide, springy branch at the edge of the small cleared area, with his weapon trained on Temas. She didn't know enough about Sirathian weapons to know if it was in firing position or not, but she seated herself carefully and slowly in a crotch of two branches, and studied him. Her face, she hoped, was impassive. Her mind was concentrating on finding the path back to his. She tried to open herself to him, and felt herself being buried under a muddy surf of horrifying feelings -- power-lust, angry fear, need, hatred, vicious triumph. Is this what it's like for Spock? she wondered. But of the thoughts and feelings she tried to project to Jeyan -- concern for the children's safety, anxiety to return to them -- she could detect no trace.

Finally, she resorted to speech. "Cousin, where have you put the children you stole?"

She thought he might not answer. Then she caught a sensation of perplexity. "Cousin, I thought -- haven't you come to help me?" he said. At that moment, the gun changed position, and Jeyan readied himself to shoot her.

"Yes, I came to help you! Why else would I have come? We are members of the same family, are we not, Cousin?"

Jeyan's confusion was growing greater, and with it, his determination. "Yes, Recorder, but somehow, I don't ... quite ... believe you. Why is that?"

Oh, God, I know why, thought Temas, and struggled to find a truth to say to wipe out the stink of her life. "I worry about the children, though. Why should they be dragged into this? If I have the information you need, why keep them?" She felt him relax a little, and concentrated on her concern about the children. Were they warm? Were they fed? Where were they, and who was caring for them?

"I will take you to them," he decided. "You can help take care of them, since you are so concerned, while you tell me what you know."

"It may involve going over my whole childhood," she said timidly. Inside, something screamed, No! Never! but she tried to push it down under thoughts of the children. At least about them, she could be whole and sincere.

"No matter. Give me your communicator and weapon."

She handed over the phaser readily enough, but felt suddenly naked when he had

the communicator. She comforted herself briefly with the thought that the Enterprise was tracking her every minute, and no doubt knew she had been joined by one Sirathian. As soon as she was with all the children, they would beam her up. She dismissed the thought as soon as it formed, though she was beginning to have an idea of how the telepathy was working. The illness had enhanced her perception, but still she could only read emotions, not ideas. And she could only transmit emotions that she really felt, not emotions she tried to work up. She still sensed that there was something more, that she ought to be able to reach Jeyan's mind deliberately instead of just broadcasting by accident. There ought to be a direct channel.... As Jeyan reached out to hurry her along, she shrank away, remembering Doctor McCoy. He had read a thought from her with physical contact. She had too many thoughts to conceal, and she didn't know how to operate her mind yet.

Keeping up with Jeyan was hard, as he slipped down and outward through the large, bending branches. It was worse when he told her to cover her light, and led her out into a night full of stars with a small half-moon. Then he set out across the desert at a pace that soon tired Tamas. She felt slightly dizzy, too, and very hot.

"Wait, please, Cousin! I haven't been well, and the doctor gave me some medicine to take." Jeyan waited as she applied the hypo to her arm, and stood straighten with the rush of artificially renewed strength. He seemed to go a little slower after that, and the moon was nearly down when they arrived, not at the babies, but at a small plane.

This was all taking longer than Tamas had expected. She tried to sleep a little in the plane, leaning her head against the roaring sidewall. When she awoke, they were on the edge of a city -- Sirath City, she assumed, but she couldn't be sure. Jeyan opened her door and all but dragged her out and down to the ground. The night air awakened her as they took a short walk to a public transporter platform, deserted at this hour.

"Where are we going, Cousin?"

But Jeyan did not answer, merely inserted money, pushed in coordinates, and walked up the low ramp onto the platform with her. Tamas wondered if Sirathian public transporters, like Terran ones, wiped the coordinates after use. She knew the Enterprise would have tracked her this far, but she'd never heard of any device that could track a transporter beam. They didn't dare beam her up until they had the children, too. Jeyan without the children would be as powerful as Jeyan with the children -- more, because the children couldn't live long without him. Tamas' last thought before the transporter beam took her was that she hoped at least that he would have to keep her and the children in the same place.

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They were outside a building that, for Sirath, was enormously tall. Five or six stories it rose, blank and bulky, with a widow or two at the bottom and a few at the top. Long and wide, by Sirathian standards, it looked hardly fit for habitation.

Jeyan gestured with the weapon, and Tamas went inside first. Then she realized what the structure was -- a storage building for grain, empty now and swept in preparation for the harvest that was almost ready. Along the walls were ramps, zig-zagging up to the top. It was gloomy in the half-light from the sun that wasn't yet risen, and Tamas couldn't see the children. But as she and Jeyan entered, she could hear the children in her mind, dreaming peaceful dreams, with an aura of warm milk and blankets about them. She followed the dreams to the far side of the building, and sat down with the children. As her eyes adjusted, she could see that there were only three of them. The baby Emperor was there, and the two little girls. But the boy Kirk had played with was gone. "He really did it," Tamas whispered. "He killed a baby!" She could see the child in her mind, blue and brown and laughing, clinging to Jim's back, and Jim's head turned to smile back at him. But there were only three children here now. The baby Emperor woke and looked around. Tamas could not help a feeling of relief that this particular child was alive. She was ashamed of herself -- as if one child could be more valuable

than another! But the stability of the planet depended in part on this child, and Temas was coming to value that stability more and more. It was so precarious, so easy to lose! And what would replace that stability seemed so much worse! She picked up the child, but he seemed to be looking for someone else. Finally, with a disappointed sigh, he laid his head on her shoulder. She wondered who he was looking for — her nurse? Spock? As she thought of Spock, the baby's head jerked up, he looked around wildly, then he began to cry. Temas tried not to think of Spock, but it was like the old dodge, "Sit in a corner and don't think of a duck;" she couldn't get him out of her head. Finally she had to lay the baby down with the others to break the mental contact that so disturbed him.

She took a long time feeding the babies breakfast, having received permission from Jeyan. Then they had to be cleaned and changed. He had, she saw, taken reasonably good care of them; it was hard not to agree with the Head, not to believe that Jeyan wouldn't really harm them. But the little boy, Latif, wasn't there; it was no bluff. While she worked, and the others ate, she kept trying to reach Jeyan mentally. She affection and concern for the children was real enough; she tried to project it outward. The children seemed to bask in it, but Jeyan showed no noticeable effect.

When all was done, Temas stood up, and sat down hastily in a wave of dizziness. How long does it take the Enterprise to scan the whole planet for a human life form, she wondered. And how long do I have? Not that I think that's a major part of this job, she hastened to assure herself, but still, I can't help but be concerned.

It would seem that the virus that give the others increased intelligence is not working that way on me. I don't feel any more intelligent. More telepathic, yes, but what good does that do if I can't reach Jeyan? The children must live! They must! Jeyan, don't you know how important children are? You are nothing; they are everything, Jeyan!

Jeyan was staring at the children; then he shook his head impatiently, and strode over to begin his questioning of Temas.

"Cousin, it is time for you to tell me what you know."

"I know that a noble leader does not steal children."

"You are a member of my family; you must help me to my goal."

"Which goal, is to become the Emperor."

"Yes, and why not? Why should not a member of our family rule the nation? I will do more for Sirath in a year than that Immortal has done in all of his immortality! You who have claimed family rights must fulfill family responsibilities, Cousin!"

"Is it my responsibility to help bring the family to such disgrace?"

"Disgrace? Glory, rather! All will be encompassed in the glory of being the Emperor's family."

"The Head of our family doesn't seem to think much of the glory. It was he who told us where to look for you. He is worried, Jeyan."

"Leave my name alone!"

"He is very worried, very upset to hear that you want power for yourself. He doesn't want to believe it."

"Well, he'll have to believe it! I am doing what is best for Sirath, and for our family! And you will help me." He reached out and pulled her to her feet, but as the fear and dizziness rose in her, he swayed and let go, staring at her with wide eyes.

He's afraid to touch me, she thought, or at least he thinks he is, which comes to the same thing. The touch seemed to have cleared some debris out of the channel that led to Jeyan. She almost thought she could reach him... He jumped back suddenly, and she found that her hand was stretched out towards him.

"Just what is it that you want me to tell you?" she asked peaceably. "Could you explain in a little more detail? I'm really not quite sure I understand." There, that was true. More or less, anyway. An outright lie, she knew from yesterday, would not be believed.

"Cousin, I am getting very tired of this, and very impatient."

"Do you realize, Cousin, that you have not once yet explained to me what you think I can do for you? Do you think I can read your mind?" At least her indignation and slight amusement was real; those he might believe.

"But you know."

"Do I?"

"Are we children, and back to playing teacher? There are ... two things ... needful ... for me to become Emperor. Am I going too fast for you, Terran?"

"Just about right. I told you I am ill."

"Part One is the overthrow of the Emperor. Of how, I have no idea. I know only that you can do it, presumably less clumsily than by the method I am using now. Also, I hope, more effectively."

"Part Two is immortality. He has it now, but I want it. A mortal Emperor would be but half an Emperor. No more delays, Cousin."

"No," she said, as steadily as she could. "No more delays." And all the while she was trying to break through to him, to reach his hateful mind. "I was born on Earth, about thirty Earth years ago. What is that in Sirathian years -- about twenty or so, isn't it? My mother was a diplomat, so we didn't stay on Terra long. My father was an anthropologist -- a good combination for a marriage, since he could ply his trade wherever my mother was sent. They named me Temas, though I begin to think Scheherazade would have been a better choice. I spent the first few years of my life on Tarsus IV, but I don't remember it at all well. When I was five, we had a year on Earth, then came here to Sirath. The voyage was very long in those days, but I enjoyed it. I was the only child on the ship; it could have been lonely, but the crew treated me as something special."

"This is nonsense."

"But, Cousin, how are we to know what part of my life holds the secrets you spoke of?"

"Certainly not the parts before you came to Sirath."

"Very well. We arrived here on a windy, rainy day. I didn't want to leave the ship, and all the friends I'd made. But my mother spoke of all the exciting things we'd see and do on Sirath, and the children I'd meet...."

Temas felt herself getting more tired and dizzy as she spoke. She stopped in the middle of a description of the games the Emperor used to play with her, to give herself the other hypo. The mind meld with Spock had left her better recall of her childhood than she had ever had before, and she inflicted it all on Jeyan. He learned (if he was listening, and Temas thought he was) all about the servants in the Ambassador's household, all about the friends made; all about her education, in great detail. When would the Enterprise find her? How much time had passed? When she came to the fire that ended her stay on Sirath, she spoke more slowly, and referred to "a servant" who had carried her out. She emphasized her real grief for her parents, and tried to slide over the rest. But something, perhaps from her own mind, alerted Jeyan.

"There, you are lying, Cousin!"

"What makes you think that?" she asked with an attempt at calm.

"Do you think I don't know when someone is telling me a lie, Cousin? Something there was that you learned in the fire, something you want to hide from me. A cousin who acts like a stranger should be treated with no more courtesy than a stranger. Or with less."

Suddenly, he made a lunge. She didn't see what he was doing until he had one of the children. He was holding the little girl that McCoy had checked out so carefully only two days ago. She started to cry; his grip was tight. Then he backed away to the ramp on the wall, and quickly began to climb. Temas rushed after him and fell, too dizzy to run. She pushed herself to her hands and knees, tried to stand but couldn't. The virus was hitting her with a vengeance now.

He had reached the first landing. The child he held was screaming. Temas looked again and he was on the third landing. She must have blacked out for a moment. In her mind she pleaded with him, but couldn't reach him. She stretched

out her hand; he seemed just beyond her straining fingertips. She tried again to stand -- she was crumpled to the ground and he was on the seventh landing. The other babies were crying now. Jeyan was at the top, far above them. He held up the child. Tamas saw them both as clearly as if they were hovering at the level of her eyes. Then they faded into a gray mist. Then she heard Jeyan's voice, going from loud to soft in her ears.

"Tamas Renarde," he called, using her name like an insult. "You will now tell me what it is that you know."

"I don't know what you mean, Cousin," she called, faint-voiced. Then, as she received no answer, at least none that she heard, she found the strength to repeat herself. "I don't know what you mean! I can't hear you! I'm sick! Come down and talk!" Indeed, her faintness was so great that she could not be sure whether she was conscious or not, talking or not. She kept trying to reach Jeyan's mind, and sometimes she thought that all her speech was only to his mind. She didn't like his being so high with the baby. She wanted him to come down and talk, but not until she'd had a nap. A nice nap would be good for all of them. What was he doing, anyway; that was no place to play. Was he still up there? How did he expect to talk from such a distance? Where was his mind? Closer? Here? Almost....

His next words came with ringing clarity. "Tell me what you know about the Emperor, or I will throw this child down now."

She heard the words, but they made no sense to her. But at that moment, she found her way into his mind, and from it took a picture of the child falling to the floor, falling farther than there really was to fall, landing more neatly than such a landing would really be, but dead, certainly dead. Tamas rose to her knees on a scream that was only a whisper to the ear; but her horror and loathing were a shriek that had all her enhanced mental power behind it, phasing from her mind directly into his. He dropped the child and grabbed his head, and Tamas saw in reality, distorted by faintness and fever, what she had seen in his mind a second ago. But this time, the little girl was followed by Jeyan. Tamas heard the sounds as they landed, one louder than the other, but both surprisingly insignificant on the dirt floor. Then silence.

Tamas gathered the remaining two children to her, looking through her falling tears into the eyes of the baby Emperor. Then she lost the fight for consciousness.

Chapter 15

She woke to the sound of a hypospray. McCoy pulled it away from her arm as she struggled to raise her head. "That's better," he said. "No need to worry now, Tamas. Jeyan's dead." But something was wrong. Tamas could feel it from the doctor's mind, could see it blurrily in his reddened eyes. She remembered. The baby girl that he'd played with was dead.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, touching him lightly, and he winced away from her. His voice was tired, raspy and monotonous, as if he'd been reciting the same words over and over for a long time.

"It's not your fault, Tamas. He did it, not you; you aren't to blame. Give up being sorry. It wasn't you; it was him. Don't blame yourself, Tamas. Please. I'm asking you not to feel this way." He gave her another hypo. "That's the last I can give you, for your own safety. In a minute, you'll feel quite alert."

"Now, listen, Tamas, I have to get you to Sickbay. But I have over four hundred people up there whose health is my responsibility. I can't bring you up in this state; the entire crew would go bonkers."

She looked at him in total incomprehension, tears streaming down her cheeks, her throat sore.

"Damn! Spock, you try; she's getting to me again." McCoy turned his back and walked off, far across the room.

Spock came into her view, the baby Emperor sleeping against his shoulder. He

squatted carefully next to Tamas. "Miss Renarde," he began, paining her by his formality. "Tamas," he amended, "your feelings are broadcasting most powerfully, even while you are unconscious." She felt naked suddenly, even as she was relieved to know that she would not have to try to convey her regret for the death she had caused. Two deaths, for killing Jeyan had been no part of the plan.

"Yes," said Spock. "We know your sorrow. We know what happened; indeed, we have seen it many times through your eyes. We waited before awakening you, in the hopes that the mental broadcast would grow fainter. Doctor McCoy did not wish to use a stimulant on you, still less a tranquilizer. It is essential that you learn control, Tamas." His eyes held hers with a look of concern.

"Can you teach me, Spock?" she asked, or thought — she could hardly tell the difference. He inclined his head in agreement, and without words, placed his long fingers accurately on her face. Almost immediately he was deep in her mind, forcing it into the position of control. As he let go, she found that she could keep the shield herself. She remembered being helped to stand on her head when she was a child. This was like that: given the position, she could maintain it. She felt Spock letting down his own barriers, carefully, to test hers. Thank you, Spock, she said in her mind, imbuing the thought with the gratitude and loving friendship that she would not be able to express in words. He tiptoed out of her mind, ready at any minute to reinforce the shield he had taught her. When she felt his fingers leave her face, she looked up at him.

"Better?" she asked.

"Your shielding is excellent, equal in power to your transmitting."

"I'm not receiving any more, either."

"Few species are fully capable of sending and receiving independently. Among most, the two are connected to some degree, and a mindshield prevents both. You will soon, of course, have no use for a shield."

McCoy strolled up, his eyes red but his manner cheerful — a bedside manner. "That's right, Tamas. We're going to let your body do what it wants, for a change, instead of sending it chasing off after gangsters."

"And what does it want to do, Doctor?"

"Pass out, of course. You're sick, Tamas; did you forget that? We're going to take you back to Sickbay and let you get well."

"But, if I'm, unconscious, won't the shield drop?"

"I'm informed by our resident expert that even in coma that shield will probably remain intact. If not, he's got to go in and patch it up, and I don't envy him the job. Now relax, Tamas."

Relaxing didn't come easily. As faintness overcame her and the room swept in and out of focus, Tamas kept her mind firmly on control and shielding.

She was still shielding hard when she woke in sickbay.

♦♦♦

For a long time, she didn't open her eyes. She was content to lie in bed not thinking. Then she started to test her mind. But how could she tell? She reached out tentatively, and felt nothing. No other minds, only her own. She called for Doctor McCoy, gently, inside her mind, and waited a long time, but he didn't come. She felt almost wistful. Oh, well, you have your privacy back, she thought. Hug it!

The sound of the door alerted her as Chapel came in, closely followed by Uhura. A sister was better to hug, Tamas found. Uhura's hug was long and hard, and there were tears in her eyes.

"You're not lonely any more, are you, honey? You were so lonely!"

"No, no, I'm fine. I'm so glad you're here, sister. We're back to normal, aren't we? You can't ... 'hear' me anymore?" She watched Uhura closely, for any signs that she was receiving thoughts.

"No, I don't hear a thing. Does that make you happy? Or does it make you sad?"

"I don't know. I don't know. Happy, I guess. I certainly never wanted to broadcast to the whole world. But, just a little telepathy — would be nice, I

think."

"You had it before, honey, you probably still have it. Don't worry, now. Okay Chris, I'm leaving. I had to promise to stay only a minute, Tamas; you're supposed to be resting."

"Kiss me goodnight, sister." Tamas rejoiced in the physicality of the hug and kiss. Minds were all very well, but bodies had their own communications -- better, in some ways. Where was Jim, she wondered as she drifted off.

♦♦♦

"Right here."

"Jim! Am I still broadcasting, then?"

"No, Tamas, you're talking. Your mouth is moving -- feel it?"

"But, I wasn't talking when I asked for you. I was just going to sleep, and wondering where you were, and here you are!"

"Tamas, sit up. And wake up. I'm told you've been asleep for hours. That's why I'm allowed to come in and wake you. You said plainly, 'Where's Jim?' and I heard it. With my ears, not with my mind. Bones tells me that you should still have the mild telepathic ability that you started with, but the exaggerated power that the illness gave you is gone. Forever, I hope."

"Why do you hope?"

"Don't you? Do you miss it?"

"I don't know. No, I don't miss it, exactly. But I was just beginning to learn control, and it was fascinating."

"Spock agrees with you. He's writing a paper that I believe is mostly taken from your mind. You may have grounds for a suit."

Tamas grinned and stretched. "Oh, I do feel well! But, Jim, why do you hope? Or is it just that you don't want your mind read?"

"I don't want that, either. But transmission, not reception, caused most of our trouble here. While my first officer and chief medical officer were running off after your signal --"

"My signal? What signal?"

"Ask Bones; he'd tell you. While they were on Sirath, I was left with a ship that was coming apart at the seams. Four hundred people, and fully a third were more or less unfit for duty."

"But, why?"

"It was you, Tamas, don't you understand? The sicker you got, the more you broadcast, and the more frightened and worried everyone became. At least, the Humans did. Some of the others seemed to handle it better. And even a few of the Humans were immune. But many were so clumsy and upset that they were good for almost nothing, especially in Engineering. We can't have half-distracted people working there! And your final shout shook the whole ship from bow to stern. I hope I never 'hear' anything like it again."

"I killed Jeyan. And the baby!"

"Look at me, Tamas. No, keep looking. Jeyan killed that baby. And it was his action that caused the feeling --that made the weapon -- that killed him. You were useful, yes, but it was the situation that Jeyan caused that resulted in his death. Remember that. Don't ever forget it. Now I have to go, but I'll send Bones in to have a look at you."

♦♦♦

McCoy looked at Tamas, then at the readouts on the panel over her, then at Tamas again. "You look fine to me, lady. You can sleep in your own cabin tonight, but stay here for the day, all right? I want you to get a little more rest."

"Bones. I'm sorry for all this mess. I really am."

"Oh, I believe you. I certainly do. I'm just glad I don't have to feel it with you. Once is enough. Your will is very compelling, you know. That's how we found you."

"How? Jim mentioned a signal of some sort, but I didn't send anything --not purposely."

"A signal isn't quite what I'd call it. You know, we had our eyes on you

until you transported. Then we lost you, and the destination had been wiped. Spock was combing the planet with the sensors, square by square, but it was a hell of a job. We didn't know where you were for a long time, and I knew you were getting sicker and sicker. And Spock was double-Vulcaning -- more and more logical."

"The doctor, meanwhile was becoming less and less so," said a deep voice from the door."

"Spock! Come in and sit down. I want to get both versions of this!"

"Both, Miss Renarde? Surely there can only be truth and error." But he nodded in greeting and sat in a chair.

"Truth, Spock, includes truth about feelings," said McCoy.

"And what was the truth about your feelings, Bones?"

"I was going crazy with worry, Tamas. I may have been a little grumpy because of it."

"A little, Doctor?" Spock's eyebrow was up.

"Stop it, both of you! I want to know what happened -- in broad terms; you don't have to argue over nuances."

"What happened, Miss Renarde --"

"I could stop you from calling me that if I were still sick," grumbled Tamas. "Never mind; go on, Spock."

"What happened was that you began to put out a telepathic signal of great, though variable, strength, and extreme emotional content."

"Annoying for you, Spock, but that's humanity! Tamas, you must have just lost or been losing consciousness, because this was like a dream -- mostly a bad dream. And it kept on cycling off and on -- everyone received parts of it, but no one got the whole. I seemed to get all the sick feelings, and later a lot of grief over that little girl. Jim kept on talking about "remorse, regret, sorrow." He was trying to calm the crew down, with that stuff pounding in his head. Uhura took up the sensor scan when Spock left. I don't know what she heard, but it didn't look pleasant. But the only one who could actually follow the broadcast to find you, was Spock. I felt as if I could go straight toward you, but I would have had to go to the surface first, and I might have set down a thousand kilometers away. So I will say that the living computer here did better than I could. He set the coordinates and put us down within a kilometer or so of the barn. Good work."

"Why, thank you, Doctor."

"What did you receive from my mind, Spock?" asked Tamas.

Spock seemed to hesitate.

"I really want to know, if it isn't too difficult for you."

"I received first a conglomerate of emotions, all unpleasant. Those had to be filtered out and suppressed. After that was done, I discovered a strong sense of a person."

"Tamas, of course. Why don't you get down to facts?"

"It was not Miss Renarde, Doctor. It was the infant Emperor. I was strongly impressed with his presence, and it was that which I followed."

Tamas stared at him. "I was holding that baby, to protect him, or to make myself feel better, I don't know which. I certainly always connect him with you. But he wanted you, too. You don't suppose -- could he have called you, Spock?"

"Unknown. Telepathy would be a useful attribute in an Emperor."

"Where is he now?"

McCoy answered. "He's in the Emperor's palace, with the other children."

"All but two," said Tamas.

"All but two."

"Who brought him back? Was the Emperor there? What did he say?"

McCoy looked at Spock, who answered with his usual patience. "I brought the children to the palace, Miss Renarde, while the doctor attended you. The Emperor was distressed to learn of the death of another of the children, but pleased, of course, to have the others back."

"What about the baby Emperor, though, Spock? How could you get him to leave

you?"

Spock's eyebrow rose. "It is true, there was some difficulty about that. How did you know, Miss Renarde?"

"I knew he was very attached to you."

"Yes, Spock, a regular case of love at first sight," said McCoy, "and the only thing I've seen to make me question the Emperor's judgment."

"He will soon forget me."

"I don't know, Spock. The Emperor isn't like ordinary people. For that matter," she smiled affectionately at him, "neither are you."

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The swish of a door awoke Tamas later in the afternoon. The Emperor was standing just inside the entrance. Instinctively, Tamas held out her hands, and the Emperor swiftly crossed the room to take them in his. Tamas closed her eyes, concentrating on his well-remembered grasp. The same — it was the same; how could he be himself and not himself? He was both more familiar and more alien than she had expected — more of a father, and more of a stranger.

"Recorder, I hope you are recovering?" he asked with gentle concern.

Tamas started; her eyes flew open. "Oh — yes, Emperor; I'm almost well, only a little tired. I'm glad you came."

"How would I not come to visit the child I knew and the adult to whom I owe such a debt?"

"Debt? You don't owe me anything, not anything! If I hadn't come here, none of this would have happened! Or if I hadn't pushed Jeyan, he wouldn't have — oh, I can't say how sorry I am, how I wish I'd never come to Sirath." Her illness made her weak; her speech was lost in sobs.

"Ifs and would-haves benefit no one, Recorder. They have no more existence than the pictures we see in the clouds." He waited until she lowered her hands from her face and looked at him. "In this reality you delivered two children from Jeyan, for which they and I will always be grateful."

"I hope not, Emperor; I hope the children forget the entire experience."

"I can answer for it that one of them will not."

"But he's just a baby!"

"He will remember."

"Everything? Will he remember Spock?"

"Indeed he will, though he may never see him again. But the first officer is a curious refreshment to the spirit, not easily forgotten."

"A refreshment ..." Tamas thought about that for a moment.

"Do you know, Emperor," she said abruptly, "I never thanked you properly for rescuing me, all those years ago?"

The Emperor made an impatient gesture, as if dusting his hands. "You know what we say on Sirath — the past is scattered chaff; the present is the grain."

"And the future, Emperor? Your future?"

"I hope I shall go on as I have for a thousand years past."

She struggled to express her meaning without being too plain. The open section of Sickbay was not the best place to talk confidentially. "I mean — your private future — the next fifteen or sixteen of your years. What happens after that?"

"You are concerned. But I assure you, there is no physical and little mental pain involved. Surely a person is to be envied, not pitied, when his most difficult task is set before him so plainly. There can be no hesitation about something so simple and necessary."

"Surely not necessary in these days. There are other planets — farms, villages."

"And old age homes, no doubt, where tired old men forget what they wish to say and say what they wish to conceal. Besides, in your eager concern, you have forgotten the character of the one you are concerned about. Not all of us are capable of concealment, of burial. There are those who will always, regardless of intention, rise to a conspicuous position." Tamas remembered that modesty didn't

exist on Sirath. The Emperor wasn't boasting; he was giving a sober and (she had to admit) probably an accurate assessment of his own abilities.

"But --"

"Recorder, let us talk rather of your own future."

•••

When it was time to go to her cabin, Tamas found the captain waiting to escort her.

"Afraid I've forgotten the way, Jim?"

He held up a hand. "Just helping out a sick friend, Tamas."

"I am a little weak-kneed, at that." He put a helpful arm around her waist, and she leaned comfortably on it. "Well, I guess you'll be leaving Sirath soon, Jim."

"Forty-eight hours, by present plans. Will you be all right here, Tamas?"

"I don't see why not. I talked to the Emperor, and he offered me room in the palace while I'm here. It's a good spot to do research. He knows I won't give away his secret, and he'll let me use his personal archives."

"What about --Spock?"

"My God, Jim!"

"Are you all right about Spock?"

"I didn't broadcast that all over the ship, did I?"

"No. No, as a matter of fact, you didn't. At least, not that I heard. I'm going by guesses from before you got yourself sick. I've seen it before, you know."

"Well Well! I'm really surprised at you, Jim. I'd no idea you were so perceptive."

"I'm not, but I do learn from experience. Will it be all right about Spock, Tamas?"

"Yes. Something's happened. I love him, you know, I really do, but it seems he makes a better friend than a lover. In some languages, you can't even make the distinction, did you know that? I love Spock, and Uhura, and Bones, and you, and the Emperor, all differently, because you're all different. But all as friends. One as a lover, too. But none as a potential life-mate, somehow. I'd hate to think I'd never see any of you again, but I don't think it. Space is big, but Starfleet is small. I'll be able to find you again."

They were at the door of her cabin. "Come in and say au revoir, Jim." He followed her inside.

•••

Tamas had hoped to see some of her friends again before she left, but no one came to her quarters; no one called. She tried to call Kirk, then Uhura, but there was no answer at either cabin. She looked around her bare cabin one last time. Satisfied that nothing was left, she headed for the transporter room. "Just as I learn my way around this place, it's time to leave," she grumbled, stepping out of the lift.

The transporter room door opened, and the room seemed fuller than usual. Kirk, Spock, McCoy, and Uhura were standing in a small group near the platform.

"You took your own sweet time about getting here," remarked McCoy. "You didn't think we'd let you get away without even a 'goodbye, see you soon,' did you?"

"Oh!" Tamas' eyes had betrayed her by filling. "I don't want to leave," she discovered. McCoy's arms embraced her in a bear hug,

"Therapy," he said around her head, and she hugged him back with all her strength. She emerged wiping her eyes and smiling.

"Oh, dear," she said ineffectually. "Uhura?" Uhura was there. Tamas bent to hug her, and whispered, "Write to me? Please?"

"Don't you worry, I'll write you everything that happens to everyone on this ship," Uhura whispered back. "Especially the green ones."

When Tamas stood back, Uhura was looking demure.

"Goodbye, Jim," Tamas said. "It's been good knowing you."

Ignoring her outstretched hand, he pulled her to him, to say in her ear, "Yes, it has, hasn't it? Have a good vacation, Tamas, and a good life after that." He kissed her firmly on the lips. "Friends?"

"Friends, I certainly hope." Tamas took a deep breath, confined her hands sternly behind her back, and turned to Spock. "Spock --"

But Spock had his right hand out, the first two fingers extended. She looked at him in amazement, learning nothing from his expression, then arranged her hand to match and shyly reached her finger to his, cold to warm. She stared at both their hands, memorizing them, then looked back to his face. It was still, but the corners of the mouth were softened and blurred, like the thought of a smile. A word came into her mind, in Spock's deep voice, //Friends.//

Then his hand was lowered, and he went to stand behind the transporter console. Tamas stood on the platform and looked at him and at the others, their faces surprised or bemused. Spock's hands moved at the controls. A shimmer, and the Enterprise was gone.



WE THREE KINGS

BY DEBORAH GOBY

"Damn, it's cold," Riley grumbled, shrugging the fur collar of his parka up around his ears. "What a way to spend Christmas Eve."

"Huh, did you say something?" Chekov murmured abstractedly over his shoulder. He was engrossed in carefully calibrating the spectrometer and had little attention to spare for Riley's muttering. He nudged one dial gently with his gloved fingertip and nodded in satisfaction as the needle quivered ever so slightly, then settled into a new position. "Perfect," he said, getting up and walking back to the pile of equipment stacked against the rock wall behind them. He bent over and picked up a tangle of leads. "I will need you to help me with the connections, Riley. You know it takes three hands to get these things properly tightened down." He handed one free cable end to his companion, "Here, help me untangle these." He pushed back his gauntlet and looked at his chronometer, "And hurry, I don't want to miss getting those readings for Mr. Spock. Now, what were you saying?"

"Don't worry, Chekov, we've got plenty of time." Riley's breath plumed out over his head as he spoke. "I was saying that it's damned cold," he continued through gritted teeth as he struggled with a particularly recalcitrant knot of cold-stiffened cable, "and this is a hell of a way to spend Christmas Eve. Especially when you know what kind of party we're missing. Ha!" he grunted as the knot gave and the lead uncoiled.

"Be reasonable," Chekov said, taking the cable from him and walking over to the telescope. "You know somevun had to draw this duty and it was just the luck of the draw. Besides, the party will not be over before we get back. We only have to stay for thirty minutes after the nova, and it should only take another half an hour to pack everything up. We won't be down here more than two hours altogether. The party will just be getting started."

"I know," Riley sighed, "but it sure is cold on this godforsaken planet." They finished connecting the leads between the telescope and the spectrometer, then checked the rest of the equipment. Chekov readjusted one of the small cameras, then stepped back, "Well, I think we are ready." He grinned at Riley, "Mr. Spock could not have done it better."

"Don't let him hear you say that," Riley wagged a warning finger at Chekov and grinned back at him.

"You don't have to worry about that," Chekov assured him, then turned back his gauntlet once more to check the time. "It is time to turn on the recorders. Watch the generator readout while I start the sequence," he nodded at a bulky, boxlike object, "this one has been throwing power spikes and I don't want any surges or drops screwing up the recordings." He pressed a button, then checked the equipment readouts. "It looks good here," he said over his shoulder, "How is the power readout there?"

"Steady as a rock," Riley answered from where he sat beside the generator, "I don't think we're going to have any problems."

"Good. Now all we have to do is kill time." Chekov went back to the pile of equipment and rummaged around for a minute. "Look what I brought," he said, smirking triumphantly. He held up a box marked "Emergency Rations".

"Emergency Rations!" Riley wrinkled his nose in disgust. "Are you star-dazzled or wasn't I told something before we beamed down?"

"Forget what the label says," Chekov said, squatting down beside him and ripping off the pull-tape. "Look!" He pulled out a bottle, some disposable cups, and a pouch crammed with sandwiches and brightly decorated Christmas cookies. "Instant party, courtesy of a friend on the food committee who felt sorry for me." He shoved the eatables into Riley's hands. "Open that stuff while I get out one more thing." He pulled out a silvery bundle and unfolded it. "This should take the chill off, Riley." He shook out a self-heating blanket and sat down on it, pulling it up around his shoulders."

"A blanket!" Riley shook his head in amazement, "You thought of everything."

"You will, too," Chekov assured him, "after you've pulled a few of these observation stints. Sit down and give me a drink and a sandwich."

In short order, the cups were filled and the food began to disappear. The two men munched contentedly for a few minutes, then Riley asked, "Can you show me what star we're supposed to be watching? I know it's over there," he pointed at a nearby peak, "but I can't pick it out of the cluster."

"Oh, sure," Chekov answered him cheerfully. "See where the bright red one is? Just look straight up from the next one on the left and it's the dim one right above the mountaintop."

Riley squinted into the distance, concentrating. "Okay, I see it," he finally said. "It really is dim. I can hardly see it against all the others."

"It will be the brightest object in the sky in a little while," Chekov replied, reaching for another cookie. The two young officers talked desultorily for a few minutes, checking their chronometers from time to time. "One minute," Chekov announced. He began counting the seconds backwards in multiples of five, staring at his chronometer. When he reached ten seconds, he looked up at the starry sky and continued to count aloud, second by second.

"... two ... one ... zero." The final words seemed to be sucked into a vacuum of absolute silence. A weighty stillness, as if the entire universe held its breath, pressed down on them for an eternal second. The dim star winked abruptly out, then blazed into a luminescent, pearly glow that almost filled the sky. Chekov and Riley watched in awe as the exploded star glowed brightly for a few minutes, then slowly shrank until it was only ten times larger and a hundred times brighter than any other star in the night sky.

"Chekov?" Riley's voice was hesitant. "Did you hear something?"

"You mean...like trumpets?" Chekov was equally cautious. "I think so, did you hear them, too?"

"Yes." Riley stared at him, "What do you suppose it was?"

"I don't know," Chekov shrugged his shoulders, "but I'm sure the instruments will tell us."

Riley nodded, "Yes, of course they will. But it was strange, wasn't it? I've never heard of that kind of auditory effect and I did a paper on unusual phenomena associated with novas while I was at the academy."

Chekov reached for the bottle, "Give me your cup, Riley, you need another drink. And don't worry about it. We can always ask Mr. Spock; he always knows about strange things that no one else ever heard of."

Riley held up his cup for a refill, "That's true. Are there any cookies left or did you eat them all while I wasn't looking?"

"Of course I didn't! My family is descended from the Tsars! We may not be rich, but we have very aristocratic manners."

"Uh huh," Riley answered skeptically, "and I'm the son of Saint Patrick."

An hour later, the two men had all the equipment dismantled and packed for transport. Riley policed the observation site while Chekov carefully hid the remains of their surreptitious party in the crate with the generator. "I think we've got everything," Riley said, walking up to Chekov's side. "You all packed?"

"Yes, I'm ready to beam up," Chekov took his communicator off his belt and flipped it open. He had just opened his mouth to call the Enterprise, when a

scream of agony shattered the stillness of the night.

"My God!" Riley's green eyes and freckles stood out with startling clarity against his paper-white skin. "What was that?"

Chekov looked at him with eyes as big as saucers, "I think," he said slowly, "it was a woman."

"It can't be," Riley's voice trembled, "the observation team said the natives didn't travel this high into the mountains."

"Vell, they must be wrong," Chekov said softly, "I am sure that was a woman's voice."

"Holy Mother of God!" Riley whispered, "what is happening to make her scream like that?"

"I don't know, but I'm going to find out," Chekov's voice was grim as he hung the communicator back on his belt and reached for his phaser.

"But that's first contact!" Riley exclaimed, "and what about the Prime Directive?"

Before Chekov could reply, another sobbing scream echoed in the darkness. Riley winced, then reached for his own phaser, "Okay, let's find her. What direction do we go?"

"This way, I think," Chekov nodded to his right where a trail of sorts let up the mountainside. "It seemed to come from that direction." He checked the setting on his weapon, "Phasers on stun until we know what we are getting into."

"Right," Riley answered him tersely, then followed him up the narrow trail.

A hundred yards up, the trail took a sharp left turn around a rocky outcrop. Chekov stopped just short of the turn and motioned for Riley to stop behind him. He listened for a few seconds, then turned to look at Riley and laid his finger across his lips. Riley nodded silently and took a firmer grip on his weapon. In a minute he could hear, too, what sounded like running feet on the trail ahead of them. Chekov flattened himself against the rock wall. Riley stepped back several paces and behind a large boulder, phaser leveled at whatever was coming towards him. A humanoid figure charged around the stony outcrop. "Stop right there!" Chekov shouted, firing a burst over its head. Before Riley could fire his phaser, the native tumbled into a heap in the middle of the path.

Chekov and Riley stepped cautiously forward, weapons trained on the unmoving figure. "I think you killed it," Riley said.

"No, I fired over its head," Chekov protested. At the sound of their voices, the figure stirred, raising its head to show an orange-complexioned face with intelligent eyes. Warily it regarded them, looking from one to the other as they spoke. Now they could see that the native was a male, wearing a fur cloak over a rough-woven shirt and baggy trousers, and a fur hood. Slowly he sat up, extending his open hands and speaking to them in a deep, bass voice. Chekov looked at the strange man for a long moment, then carefully put his phaser back on his belt and stepped forward, extending his open hands just as the native had. Suddenly, another agonized cry came from ahead of them. The man scrambled to his feet and rushed forward to grab Chekov's hands, frantically pleading in an unintelligible language; then he dropped the officer's hands and ran back the way he had come.

"Come on, Riley!" Chekov shouted, following the running man up the steep path. Phaser in hand, Riley pounded after him. A hundred yards further on, the native turned off the trail onto a barely discernible trace that led to the mouth of a shallow cave. The man darted in and fell to his knees beside a figure lying on a bed of straw. The flickering lantern, hung overhead on a stony spur, showed Chekov and Riley a young woman far gone in pregnancy. As they skidded to a stop behind the man, she grabbed his hands in a convulsive hold, grimaced, and tried to sit up as another contraction took hold of her. A low moan escaped her lips, then she arched her back and screamed in earnest.

Chekov flipped open his communicator. "Chekov calling the Enterprise," he said sharply.

"Kyle here," a voice answered, "you are in a hurry to get back, aren't you?"

"Forget that. We need Dr. McCoy down here immediately." Behind him, the

woman whimpered and the man spoke to her soothingly, stroking her hair. He turned his head to look at Chekov, despair and hope showing in his eyes.

"What was that?" Kyle demanded.

"Never mind what it was," Chekov snapped. "Just take a fix on these coordinates and beam Dr. McCoy down. This is an emergency!"

"All right," Kyle answered, "I'll page him at the party and send him to you as quick as I can. Kyle out."

While Chekov was arguing with the transporter chief, Riley had been examining the woman and the man. Chekov shut his communicator with a snap and stepped forward, "How is she?" he asked.

"I think she's dying," Riley's voice shook as he looked up at his friend, fear in his eyes. "She looks like she's in shock and she's lying in a pool of blood."

"I'm going back for the blanket," Chekov decided, "you look around here for something to cover her with." He spun on his heel and started down the path, "And put her feet up," he called over his shoulder.

When he got back with the blanket, Dr. McCoy was just materializing on the path in front of the cave. As the doctor's form took shape in a shower of coruscating sparkles, the native's dark eyes widened and his orange face paled to a delicate shade of peach. Apprehensively he looked from McCoy to Chekov to Riley. Then he crouched closer to the woman as the doctor took in the situation at a glance and rushed to her side.

Chekov stepped to the rear of the cave where Riley stood near an animal that bore a certain resemblance to a burro. It cropped contentedly at a pile of grass at its feet. "You looked like you needed something to drink," he held out the bottle and what was left of the sandwiches and cookies, "so I brought these back, too."

"Thanks, but I'm okay. Besides," Riley gestured around the cave, "I didn't see anything that looked like food in here."

"Oh," Chekov said thoughtfully, "maybe we should give the food to them. If Dr. McCoy says it's all right."

Riley nodded, "That's what I think."

An hour later, mother and child were comfortable wrapped in Chekov's blanket and lying on a clean bed of straw. The woman smiled tiredly over the sleeping baby's head as the three men knelt beside her to admire the newborn child. On the other side of her makeshift bed, her husband reached to touch the blanket again, wonder growing in his eyes as he felt its warmth. Once more, he carefully studied the faces of the Enterprise crewmembers. Glancing up, Chekov saw the look and smiled at the man. "What do you think, Dr. McCoy? Can we give him the food?"

"Oh, sure," the doctor replied, "it's compatible with their systems. Shouldn't hurt them at all."

Chekov stood and went over to the side of the cave where he had left the pouch and bottle on a convenient ledge. He picked them up and walked around the woman and child to where the man crouched, holding her hand. As Chekov approached, the native rose and faced him, respect and awe written plainly on his alien features. The officer took a cookie from the pouch and broke it in half, holding one half out to the man, while he slowly raised the other half to his mouth and took a bite. The native watched intently as Chekov chewed and swallowed, then took a small nibble of his half of the cookie. He held it in his mouth for a second, then smiled, swallowed, and took a bigger bite. Chekov held out the pouch. The native stared unbelievably, then reached out with both hands and took the pouch. Using a similar pantomime, the officer gave him the bottle, too. When the native tasted the liquor, a smile of recognition widened his mouth and he squatted down to give the woman a drink.

"Should she drink that?" Chekov asked McCoy concernedly.

"One drink won't hurt her," the doctor answered, "see, he's putting the bottle away. He seems to know what it is, so I don't think he'll give her too much, and a little will help her sleep."

The man placed the pouch and the bottle next to the woman, then stood. Facing

Chekov, he raised his clasped hands to his forehead and bowed deeply from the waist, speaking a solemn-sounding phrase. He bowed twice more, to Riley and McCoy, repeating the same phrase each time.

A little while later, the three men from the Enterprise were walking down the path to the place where Chekov and Riley had left the scientific equipment. As they turned back onto the major trail, they heard the shuffling sound of many feet and the murmur of voices coming up the trail. Riley looked at the other two, "I don't know about you, but I've had enough excitement for one night. I think we should just get out of sight and let them pass."

"I agree," Chekov answered. He pointed to a pile of tumbled boulders, "We won't be visible in those shadows."

From the shelter of the rocks, they watched four men come towards them, carrying long staffs and followed by a small herd of furry animals. At the place where the faint trace led up the mountainside, they stopped and conferred quietly, while the animals milled around them. The tallest one pointed to the brilliant star and spoke forcefully, then he and one of the others started toward the cave, while the remaining two men prodded the animals up the narrow way. McCoy, Riley and Chekov looked at each other, then started down the trail. With only the barest minimum of conversation necessary, they beamed aboard the ship and thoughtfully stowed the equipment in the science lab. They were walking down the corridor toward the Rec room and the party when McCoy broke the silence, "Well, you two are awfully quiet," he drawled.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" Riley asked.

"I don't know," Chekov answered him, "what are you thinking?"

"Well," Riley said slowly, "I'm thinking about the star, and a baby born in a cave, as if its parents had no where else to go."

"And the shepherds," McCoy put in. "Didn't they look like shepherds to you?"

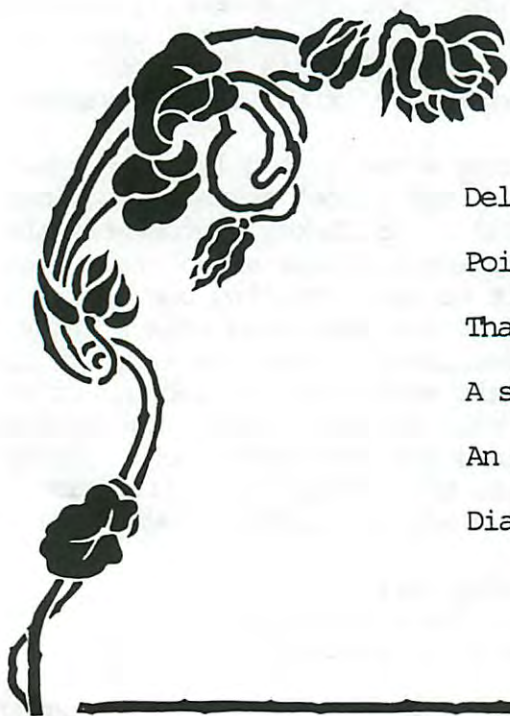
"Yes, they did," Riley nodded his head.

"And there were three of us," Chekov mused reflectively.

The three men stopped where they were and stared at each other.

McCoy spoke softly, "Do you suppose???"

From the open doors ahead of them, Uhura's lovely voice rang forth, "We three kings of Orient are..."



A Pearl of Great Price

Delicate, gentle, deft hands for healing;
Eyes that shine with a tender compassion,
Poignant, mysterious; a soothing presence --
Ethereal childlike, a disarming awareness
That keenly discerns and absorbs in her being
What is truest and best in those she observes;
A shimmering fragility at odds with a power
That vanquishes pain and wrings life from death;
An agonized strength that willingly suffers
Alien torment for the sake of another;
Diaphanous warrior, redeemer from darkness,
A pearl of great price, the gem of her race.

-- Elaine Sheppard

In Memoriam: Edith Keeler

In the realized dream of a world at peace;
In the end of hunger and want's degradation;
In the soaring freedom of a star-faring race;
In the joining together of harmonious worlds
Defending the freedom and the rights of all;

In the dedication to the quest for knowledge;
In the hands of the healers and their wondrous tools;
In the timeless words of the galaxy's poets;
In the vessels that sail through the infinite cosmos
Searching for new life and new civilizations;

To all the achievements secured by your sacrifice;
In all the good untold billions have done;
In one man whose allegiance to those billions safeguarded;
The greatness you foresaw in humanity's future --
Your vision lives on, as eternal as love.

— Elaine Sheppard

Too Early

Edith, woman of my dreams,
You were born too early.
Your ideas and ideals
Were too revolutionary.
The would have worked,
Changed the world forever.
But if you had lived,
I might not have.

— Patt

NOT NOW

I always wanted a beach to walk on,
Someplace to relax and be myself,
With softly rolling waves
And beautiful, colorful sunsets,
A beach where comfort lived, and peace.
What life gave me was
Stormy, wind-whipped waves with
Cloudy, electric-shot dark sunsets
Filled with strife.
All my life I searched for peace
Until I got it, and found that although
I always wanted a beach to walk on,
I wanted it tomorrow,
Not today.

— Patt



Feeling

This simple feeling
A handclasp, warmth
The miracle of touch
Between two diverse
Personalities that have
Become closer than brothers
This simple feeling
A complexity of emotion
Whose expression will
Change two lives
This simple feeling
Love

-- Patt

Sickbay

Sickbay -- a nice neat place to die,
All sterile and clean,
Gauges and lights flashing,
Pretending everything will be fine.
Techs hurrying and rushing,
Instruments collected and used,
The hiss of numerous hypos,
Medicine prepared and given --
All seen through a haze:
Pain receding,
Awareness fading,
Dreading to hear the words,
"He's dead, Jim."
Only they are not spoken,
-- Hope ascends --
Sickbay is also
A place for healing.

-- Patt

Questions for Charlie

We have mourned you, Charlie;
We have mourned your sadness.
Crossed by your shadow,
Through the years, we have wondered
Where, in all the cosmos, you now are.
We have mourned your anguish;
We have mourned our lacking;
We have gazed with sorrow
Toward the far-off star
Where we left you once
To your childish weeping.
Are you sobbing still,
Or have your tears been dried
By those too wise
To leave you in our keeping?
Have you learned better use
For the power they gave --
The alien power
That condemned you to exile?
Have you learned to command
Untold might with compassion?
Has your will grown assured?
Have you learned to forbear?
Are you able at last
To accept, understand,
And forgive a blind helplessness
That failed desperate pleading?
Have you come to embrace
Transcendent destiny now,
Knowing your own is the requisite price?
And has the bittersweet promise
Of manhood stirrings
Become your transfiguring sacrifice?

-- Elaine Sheppard



The Devils in the Dark

Agony ... horror ... death for the children!
Cry for the children!
Mourn for the children!
Devils ... destruction ... the Chamber of the Ages
Holds the lost children!
Weep for them all!
Protect ... avenge ... avenge the lost children!
Safeguard the children,
Those who are left!
Drive out the devils who slay all the children!
Drive them away
From the Vault of Tomorrow!
Sadness ... forboding ... the end is upon us!
Despair for the children!
Lament the lost race!
In the dark there are devils who rampage, ignoring
The cries of the children
Who die in their wake!

— Elaine Sheppard



Fortunes of War

You face me squarely and make no excuses.
It was, you inform me, a question of duty.
(If only you knew how many times in the past
I've faced accusation with the same cool disclaimer!)
Your duty, like mine, is an unrelenting master
That casts aside scruples, affords no compassion,
And demands satisfaction at honor's expense;
Yet you follow your path, just as I follow mine,
At peace -- more or less -- with the course you have chosen.
Affinity is weakness and credence disaster
Where allegiance is given and oaths are sworn;
Yet in the end there are truths that cry out to be spoken:
"What are you," I wondered, "that you could do this to me?"
"First Officer of the Enterprise" -- and treachery is relative.
Your loyalties, like mine, are absolute and unassailable,
And our purposes cross. I ask and give no acknowledgement
Beyond the respect that one warrior owes another
And the regret, however fleeting, that purpose stood between us.

— Elaine Sheppard

The Youngest Brother

by Karen C. Hunter

-- One in a continuing series of --
-- "Tales from the Vulcan Hearth" --

In the Time of the Beginning, when the world was cooler and the sun further away, The People did not live as they do now. Instead of cities, most lived with their families in small villages and towns which were fortified to protect them against the constant attacks of both the animals which might seek to eat them and the warriors of other tribes who might wish to kill them and steal what little they owned.

In this time, there lived far up in the hills which surround Grandfather Mountain, a very prosperous and contented tribe. Here in the hills they found plenty to eat and drink, herds which supplied them with fleece, and protection against storms and animals. Few warriors of other tribes cared to make the long trek into the wilderness to attack or to steal. So this tribe lived in contentment.

For many years this tribe had been led by a man old in years and in wisdom. He had many children, three of them boys. The first boy was the oldest child. He was a great warrior and led his people in many raids against others. Always he was the strongest and bravest, and the other warriors followed him with eagerness.

The second son was close to this brother in age. He had early shown great skill in the hunt and was more successful than his age-mates in tracking and killing both beasts for meat and beasts for protection. He wore a shirt made from the skin of a le-matya, and his shield was protected by the hide of the sh'varn.

However, the very youngest child of the Clan Leader was his third son, Soshen. This child was born of a different mother, a woman who had visited the tribe for a short time and left soon after his birth. He was sickly and weak as an infant, and all his life his family treated him as the baby. He was never required to put his hand to any useful skill nor to go with his elders on their many expeditions. However, he was a bright child and somehow escaped being spoiled by this treatment. He even had decided what skill he wished to learn, though he did not dare to mention this to his family. He wished to become a healer.

Yes, child, it is true today that males may become healers. But in those days, healing was seen only as an extension of the female magic, and the skill was not permitted to males. Yet, this did not matter to Soshen, who had watched the village healers from his youngest days and thought them wonderful and kind. He wished to be just like them, to care for the weak and helpless so they might grow strong, as he had done.

Now, this boy kept this secret in his heart for many years, following the healer, his Aunt T'Yihl, and learning her skills when she did not suspect what he was doing. As long as his father did not ask him what he wished to do, Soshen would continue to learn on his own. Yet, of course the day came when his father

brought him apart from the others to ask what training he would prefer.

Soshen did not know what to answer, for he knew his only request would be forbidden. He bowed his head, and his father said, "Come, child, thee is of an age to know thy heart well. Thee has passed the tests of bravery, though with little skill, and thee is a man. Would thee choose to go to Shembel Mountain and become a scholar? Or perhaps an acolyte at Gol? It has been long since we have had either a scholar or a Master from our people, and all would help you journey there."

"No, Father, neither of those are my choice. I do not wish to leave this village yet."

His father smiled on him and touched his cheek gently. "Ah, thee is still a child yet. Do not be in a hurry." And he went off to his duties, leaving his son alone.

So, for a time Soshen continued learning his trade secretly, from the women who did not even know that he was learning. He lived in dread of what might yet come, until one day his whole village was changed forever.

Over the years the villagers had come to the conclusion that since they had been safe and protected for so long, this would always be so. Their sentries grew lax, they failed to keep additional stores, and they grew lazy in practice with their weapons. One night, late in the Time of Storms, when the winds howled around them and the dark came early and left late, another tribe slowly crept up the mountainside and attacked. In almost as short a time as it takes to tell, Soshen's people were forced out of their homes and scattered in the mountains, without food or protective clothing, and with few weapons. Now their enemies filled their village, eating their food, and reveling in the protection of this strong and mighty citadel.

There was great hardship and illness, for this tribe had grown soft and weak, and there were many small children who cried from hunger in the night. The healers were busy daily, and Soshen's help was neither questioned nor forbidden.

One day his second brother said he knew the stores of food were running low, and he chose a small band to hunt with him. They did not have long spears or arrows, only three old liras and one ahn-woon for each. Yet, food was necessary, and they went off to hunt. Three days passed without sign of the hunting party, and their family members were unable to touch their minds or find evidence of their presence. Hungry and storm-tossed, the tribe waited until they could stay in this valley no more. Just as they were packing up their shelters to leave, the hunters returned. Yet they returned in worse condition than when they had set out for the hunt. Only one lira remained of the three, carried by the one warrior who remained uninjured. Between two others, who stumbled from loss of blood, Soshen's brother was pulled on a litter. He raved in pain and fever from the poison of the le-matya's claws, and there was no meat for the tribe to eat. The healers tried to get rid of the poison, but he had been ill too long. He died, apologizing that he brought back no food.

Now the eldest brother stood up, and in his grief for his brother swore an oath. "We have been forced from our homes too long, and we run like beggars instead of the free people we are. I will take back all the warriors to our citadel and win it back. It is our home, and we know all the ways of it. Surely we can defeat the strangers and force them out."

Now, these people were desperate, and they were cold and hungry as the harsh Storms raged through the mountains. All who could fight swore to follow the eldest son back to their home, to regain it for their families or die. Soshen begged his father to allow him to join the warriors but was told that he was too young and unskilled. He was not to join them.

Yet Soshen was sure in his heart that he had some part to play in this fight, and secretly he followed after the warriors as they crept back toward the citadel. For three nights the warriors made their way in secret, watching for the warriors of the enemy who might be on the lookout for them. One by one they made their way to the hidden passage, deep in the mountain which led back again into the center of the village. And Soshen followed them at each step, until as the red dawn rose

behind the Grandfather, his brother and the others burst forth and caught their enemy by surprise.

The fighting was swift and savage, as only The People could be in those far off days. The enemy had been well fed and slept deep in the night, thinking the defeated tribe far away. Now many of them never made it from their beds, throats slit before an alarm could be given. Then while Soshen watched from the shadows, one warrior more alert than the others killed his silent attacker, and soon all were fighting. In the end, the surprise had been sufficient, and Soshen's people soon had retaken their village and forced the few remaining of the enemy out into the mountains.

Then Soshen looked for his brother and found him lying wounded in a group of dead warriors. He too might have died, but Soshen swiftly pulled him out and began to practice the skill he had learned. He was still healing, hands on his brother's heart, when their father and the people who had not fought made their way back into the center of the village.

One of the Healers came to Soshen and said, "Child, I shall take over now. Thee is apt to do more harm than good."

"No, T'Nys, I have healed him. It is my right to stay with my brother until I am sure he is well."

"Child, the skill is not thine. Does thee wish to kill him?"

At that point the elder brother opened his eyes and smiled at the younger. As he rose to his feet with ease, Soshen demanded loudly, "Does it look as if I have killed him? He is well; better than thee did for my other brother. I can do it, T'Nys. The healing skill is mine." And he raised his hands before her. "This is my choice, to heal and help others. I can do it."

The Clan Leader came up and confronted his youngest son. "The healer says it is not thy place, and I agree. Let us have no more nonsense about thee becoming a healer. Boys do not have this choice."

"Father of my son, I thought thee had better sense," said a quiet voice in the crowd. The Clan Leader turned swiftly and confronted a woman who stood out from the rest.

"Lau, what is thee doing here, now?"

"I came back to see if my son is ready to join me. It appears that he is, and thee has given him no appreciation of what gift I have given him."

T'Nys bowed her head beside Soshen, who was wide-eyed in surprise. He had never seen his mother, than he could remember. "Lady, if I had known, I would not have spoken so."

Lau smiled gently. "I take thee at unfair advantage. Clan Leader, see to thy village, or thee shall lose it again very shortly. And there is other work for the healers. For now, I should like to speak to my son."

The villagers around them scattered, and Soshen stood silently and looked at the woman who called herself his mother. She was short and stocky, yet her hands were as slender and long as his own. In her hair was the same tinge of bronze that colored his, though he could see strands of gray there as well. She touched his hair gently and said, "The strain of the Fire God holds true, I see. Thee is truly my child."

"Who is thee?" he asked in a whisper.

"Lau, the Fire God's daughter. And the care and healing of The People is my concern. I see that thee has inherited that skill of mine. Has they inherited as well the wish to help others?"

There were dozens of questions that Soshen wanted to ask, but that question spoke so clearly to his heart, he could only say, "Yes, that is my wish. Can I be a true healer after all?"

"Soshen, thee can be anything thee wishes. If being a healer is thy desire, that is what thee shall be."

The boy drew himself up proudly. "Then why did thee leave me here, alone and unknowing of my heritage? I have lost so many years of learning, when no one would allow me my desire."

"Thee has learned what thee needed at thy age, what could only come if thee did not know of the heritage. Many a child of the gods has lost his soul from not being able to understand who The People are and what his part in life on this world is. I could not teach thee that, only thy father could. Now it is time for thee to come with me if thee chooses." She drew her robe tightly around her shoulders and for a moment looked sad. "I have been without thee for thy childhood, Soshen. When thee has children, thee shall know just how much I have given up in allowing that."

"Then I shall come with thee and learn, all that thee can teach. I know so little and there is so much to do. None of us could save my brother from the poison of the le-matya. Do you know a cure for that?"

"Not yet, Soshen. I have not found that cure. Perhaps thee shall be the one to find that answer. There is still much to be learned."

As they spoke, the Clan Leader came up behind them. He was much taller and darker than Lau, yet to Soshen they looked very right together. "Am I losing my son, Lau?" he asked. "And shall I lose thee again with him?"

"I think perhaps this time I shall not be gone quite so long," she said with a smile. "Soshen will not be lost to you. We shall return many times, and he shall come home for good when he has finished his study with me."

Now the entire village had to work very hard to repair the damages made in the fight and by the occupation of the enemy. Many of the warriors died, and many carried injuries with them the rest of their days. But the Clan Leader had learned his lesson, and the citadel was never again taken by an enemy.

When all was safe and settled Soshen went with Lau, down to the Oasis and the house she owned, where there was a teaching center and hospital for all who could journey there. Soshen was the first of many boys who eventually followed and learned the Art of Healing, now that Lau had shown them the way. He never forgot his people at home and the brother who had because of the poison; and eventually he returned to live among them once again, to marry there and keep his own hospital for any who could come. Lau taught always that a healer owned allegiance only to the ill and to no other.

Soshen spent many years searching for the cure for the poison of the le-matya, only to be met by defeat after defeat. It was not until his long life was nearly over that he and two of his great-grandchildren accomplished the task. No one has died of the poison since, who has been able to use that antidote. It was the proudest accomplishment of his long life.

Soshen and the other boys who were the first male healers brought to their profession a new perspective and insight that had been lacking until then. The skill of healing was strengthened and expanded by female magic and male strength together.

Always, child, the Way of The People has been strengthened by duality and diversity. Never forget that all goes best when each of us is on the path best suited to our skills, no matter who and what they are. Perhaps one day, your skills shall benefit The People as did Soshen's.



Tales of the Fifth Year



by A.C. Willment



Such Stuff As Dreams Are Made On

McCoy sidled out from behind an outcropping of rock, balancing himself on the ledge with one hand. Loose sand shifted under his feet, and he flattened against the cliffside. Below him, he saw a tiny dot of gold and another of red, darting through the scrub in the ravine.

He flipped open his communicator. "Jim," he hissed, "don't send a search party. Don't deal with the bastards. It's a trap. We escaped."

"Where are you?" Kirk's voice fizzled from the box. "Where's Spock?"

"He's here somewhere. We got separated. I'm about 250 meters up. I can see you from here." He tried to wave at the dots of color, swayed, and pressed back against the rock. "I'll be at the bottom in five minutes" -- pebbles shifted again -- "and if I'm not careful, a lot sooner."

"We'll wait here," Kirk said. "Sit tight."

McCoy scrambled for a handhold. "I'm trying. The point is, don't let Paaku blackmail you. We're free." He shut the communicator. "We don't need that madman to kill us," he mumbled. "We can do a perfectly good job of getting ourselves killed without him."

Christopher Pike tensed, as if preparing for a life-saving leap onto the doctor's perch. A sudden movement several yards back on the ledge, and a clatter of pebbles, had caught his attention. "For god's sake, man," he breathed. "Turn around. Look behind you."

Vina clutched Pike's arm.

"He didn't hear it," Pike moaned. "He's too busy keeping his balance to notice. Jesus, Jim, how do you let your people get into these messes?"

McCoy jerked his head up sharply, eyes wide. Pike raised his fists in exultation. "He heard it!" McCoy reached for his phaser. "No, no, you idiot!" Pike cried. "You'll bring down the whole mountainside. Just keep moving...that's it."

McCoy edged his right foot a few centimeters along the ridge, and carefully drew his left alongside it, then repeated the agonizing shuffle. Pike kept coaxing him with unheard instructions, as if McCoy were an actor in a play. But if he had scripted and directed the drama, the result would have been quite different under Pike's guiding hand.

McCoy was inching his right foot out for the third time when the warrior pounced. "It's no use," Pike said. "If this hulk doesn't disembowel him first, he'll fall." He turned to the wizened, massive-domed figure at his other elbow. "Chore, can't we--?"

"We are forbidden to intervene," Chore's voice announced sadly, resounding from every spot in the room except his tightly closed lips. "As they may not

communicate with us, so we cannot with them, for good or ill."

Vina buried her face in Pike's shoulder and squealed. Pike raised his arms as if to pluck the physician from the cliffside. McCoy edged backward, scrambling to evade the anger barbarian's sword-pokes at his belly. "I'm a doctor, dammit," he growled, "not a mountain goat. Spock! Spock!"

Pike's eyes burned again with hope. The clink of pebbles this time had come from above and behind McCoy. "Not so loud," Pike scolded. "With those ears, he's bound to hear you."

A streak of blue plummeted between McCoy and his attacker, barely missing the flashing blade. Spock smashed McCoy up against the cliff wall with one arm and kept him firmly pinned there, while his other hand snaked out to drop the warrior with a quick nerve pinch.

"Good old Spock!" Pike cheered. He turned to Chore. "You knew, didn't you? You knew all along he'd come to save the day."

"We are powerful, but not omnipotent," Chore reminded him in the same squeaky, disembodied voice. "This is all occurring in real time, as we speak. Do you deem it possible I would know any more than you, whether this drama ends in comedy or tragedy?"

"It's not over yet," Vina said, and pulled Pike's attention back to the screen. The warrior toppled off the cliffside and plunged downward, followed by a barrage of pebbles, then larger stones, then still larger rocks.

McCoy again clawed at the sheer side of the cliff, which crumbled in his hands. He had the sensation of running on a treadmill. Spock pressed against the rock. "Unfortunately," the Vulcan told the doctor, "it appears that in saving you, I have inadvertently triggered a landslide."

"Any last wishes?" McCoy said. Inexorably, the ledge crumbled.

"I do not concede defeat," Spock replied. He threw his arms around McCoy. "No wisecracks, please. We are going down together. Relax every muscle, and you will land with minimal damage."

"Relax?" McCoy argued. "How the hell am I supposed to--"

Pike cupped his hands in a megaphone over his lips. "Meld, Spock! Meld!"

Through the roar of tumbling rocks and the bump and crash of the two blue-and-black clad forms careening back-over-back into the canyon, Pike could hear snatches of the silent, intense chant, "our minds are merging--our minds are one--"

The tiny specks of red and gold grow larger as the pair tumbled downward. "Jim and Scotty, as they promised," Pike said. "Bravo, lads!"

The picture focused on the floor of the canyon. Spock and McCoy were black and blue as their uniforms, but Pike noted with relief that they appeared intact. "Pardon our unorthodox entrance," Spock said.

"Mr. Kyle," Kirk said, "Four to beam up, pronto." The officers blazed like a covey of phoenix, only to be reborn, Pike knew, safely aboard his beloved Enterprise.

The images on the screen dissolved to black. "Well, Chris," Vina said, "have you had your thrills and chills for the day?"

Pike stretched his powerful arms, releasing a luxurious yawn, and allowing his biceps to ripple attractively in the artificial sun of his pleasant cage. The illusory body the Talosians had bestowed upon him to compensate for the cruelly crippled original was even better than his real form had been before the accident. And this body never grew ill or aged.

But not even the illusions of the Talosians, powerful and seductive as they might be, could entirely satisfy the Christopher Pike who had once sat in the center of a massive, pulsing web of technological wonders and sent it hurtling to span galaxies at his command, and held hundreds of lives in his palm, subject to his absolute power, offering unqualified trust in his judgment.

No way around it, Vina thought. He'll always be the captain of the Enterprise. "Chris," she suggested, "why don't we go riding?" He shook his head. "Swimming? The crystal pools of Epsilon Tau IX? We haven't gone there in ages."

"Vina," he said sadly, "you forget. We haven't gone anywhere. Ever. We only

think we have. We've never even made love. We only dream we do."

She twined her arms around his waist. "And what a delicious dream it is, too. That's what we should do next."

Pike disengaged himself from Vina, took her hand, and turned again to his guardian. "Look," he said. "You can do almost anything. Why can't you let me imagine I'm captain of the Enterprise again? Just for one outing?"

"That is the one illusion we must forbid you," Chore answered. "Were we to allow that, you would never emerge from it. The woman would die of loneliness, and this we cannot permit."

"Chris," Vina appealed, "For three years, I've been sharing you with these images of that ship. You're supposed to have left all that behind you. You were supposed to be happy here."

He hung his head. The ravaged face on his real, gutted body dropped simultaneously onto the chest restraint of the mobile chair in which it was strapped. A tear slid down Vina's flawless cheek, and a matching drop also coursed from the bleary eye of her own mauled and malformed real self, which sat comatose next to Pike's chair, behind a special illusion-proof energy shield the Talosians had constructed to protect the Humans' fragile happiness from their reality. But though the two could not draw their pathetic bodies directly into their illusions, Chore knew, neither could the Talosians entirely blot out their awareness of them, nor of the lives they had left behind.

"Please guard your emotions more carefully," Chore broadcast to Pike sternly. "Your anger and resentment, while understandable in a Human who feels he has been cheated of something he desires, is most disquieting and, if continued, may result in disaster. I remind you that if you break the illusions we offer you, you will not gain the illusion you desire. You will only regain your reality. Do you wish that?"

"No," Pike said.

"Were we less concerned for your well-being," the Talosian continued, "we might indeed allow you this escape. When you bade farewell to the Federation we promised your friends Kirk and Spock that we would provide you with happiness, and wished them a reality as pleasant as your dreams." Chore inclined his pulsing, bulbous head in what appeared to be sadness. "It seems Humans can only be made happy by that which they cannot have, or by causing unhappiness to others, and ultimately to themselves. So we have failed to see the first of our wishes fulfilled."

"And the second?" Pike said.

"There is yet one year of the Enterprise's mission to carry out," Chore told Pike.

"So it's still undecided," Pike said. No answer came from Chore, and Pike's voice rose. "It is undecided, isn't it? You can't know any more than anyone else what the fifth year is going to be like? Or can you...?"

"As we transcend space, as we transcend the limitations of the material world, as we transcend the boundaries of the senses and the mind, so occasionally may we transcend time. We see many things," Chore admitted.

"You know already," Pike said. "Tell me! Do they make it home all right? What happens to them? I cannot wait a year. If you want me to be happy, then--"

"You are entirely too absorbed in this Enterprise," Chore answered, coming as close to dismay as a serene Talosian ever had. "We must forbid you to view any more of these images. You become dangerously agitated."

"Okay, okay. I'll calm down," Pike said. "I suppose you're right. I have to let go. It's Jim's show now, god help him. But at least tell me. They get back to home base all right, don't they? Everything goes fine for them?"

Chore summoned every illusion-casting power at his command, and threw a welter of images on the screen.

Pike lunged from his place beside Vina and began beating on the screen with his fists, as if he could pound the images to dust, and persuade the Talosians to create a better reality from the rubble. Chore staggered under the blows of Pike's

emotions, and the screen faded to gray.

"Well, was that reality?" Pike demanded. "Or was that another of your illusions?"

Chore hesitated. "Permit me to show the future of the Enterprise again," the Talosian said.

The screen sprang to life again, painting itself with images of thrilling last-minute escapes, near-impossible feats, heroic rescues and moments of warm camaraderie, peppered with riotous, merry shoreleaves on exotic planets. The screen faded again to a final image of Kirk, beaming and bemedalled, saluting the members of the Council one by one. Spock, at his elbow as always, permitted himself a discrete smile, and McCoy, again as always, figeted in his dress uniform. "Thank you, gentlemen," the phantom Kirk respectfully told the Council, and waved away Nogura's offer of an Admiral's epaulets. "She's a good ship. I think I'll stay with her another five years or so."

Pike turned from the screen. "So which is the reality?"

"This is Talos IV," Chore said. "The reality is — as you desire it to be. And there will be no more images from the Enterprise, either way. Choose."

Pike paused. His mind focused on the first set of images. Could these, he shuddered, have been true? And if they were, and he were to select reality--

He looked up, and saw the wall seem to melt away. He caught a glimpse of a battered, dying body in a chair, beside a grotesquerie that might once have been female, and Human. "Is this the price for living in the real world?" he asked himself.

The light connected to the chairbound figure's chest blinked once.

"Then it's either all reality, or all illusion?" he asked again.

Again the light blinked once.

Pike focused on the image of Kirk before the Council. The captain's smile seemed to swell and surround him, devouring the room, the Talosian, the rapidly shriveling dream-self of Vina, and the grim figures behind the wall.

Then all was as it had been. Vina pressed her youthful curves up against his strong and supple illusion-body. Chore nodded.

"How about that swim?" Vina said. She wished herself into a scanty suit, and he imagined himself into briefs. Without even a farewell to Chore, they whisked themselves to the cool caverns of Epsilon Tau IX.

Chore remained in the chamber alone. He was unsure if what he had done was right. He decided at last that, right or not, it was necessary.

He wove himself a simulacrum of a Human body, crafted from the image of Kirk, clad it in briefs, created himself an image of the pretty woman he had seen in the images of the Enterprise's Communications console, and joined Pike and Vina in the pool.





Other Lives

Back to quarters, doctor's orders. "Rest up, Jim, until I can figure out what's wrong with you," McCoy had said.

Nothing wrong with me, Kirk thought, that a little time in mufti wouldn't cure. He shivered. Unless, of course, that makes it even worse. He lay back on his bunk, blinking at the ceiling. I can't believe that after five years we're going home. I don't believe I still remember where home is. I'm not sure I know anymore where home is.

But another small voice at the back of his mind whispered seditiously that he did know where home was, and that he could not go back.

He thumbed through his library tapes, selected one and popped it into the computer. He could barely life his hand to punch the buttons. Got to check the graves. Someone must have turned it up, I can't be that tired.

I'm five long, weary years older than when we set out, Kirk reminded himself, and five years at this job is like five centuries of normal life.

The tape began. Kirk gazed at his own image, a younger, pristine self. "Captain's log, stardate 1011.1," the infuriatingly cheery voice piped. "First log entry, five-year deep-space mission. First full command." The tiny Kirk-child spewed forth taped statistics. I sound like one of those chipmunk cartoons at the Telecommunications museum. Damned if I didn't look like one too. He felt even more of a cartoon now, flat and flimsy.

He listened with a knowing smirk as his younger incarnation bravely tooted his piccolo over his achievements. You thought you knew everything then, didn't you, youngster?

The log moved on to the enumeration of the virtues and skills of his shiny new crew, man by man. Several of them had not had much chance to grow tarnished in the steady stream of near-disasters in which the Enterprise had been mired.

"My first officer, Lieutenant Commander Gary Mitchell," the tape boasted. "I could not ask for a better man. Yes, and you left him at the edge of the galaxy under a headstone that didn't even have his own name on it." He recalled that the maddened officer had carved Kirk's name on that monument deliberately, intending to leave his captain to molder, except Dehner had thwarted him. The circumstance did not console him.

"My science officer, Mr. Spock, comes with highest recommendations from Captain Pike, and despite his unsettling appearance--" My god! Could I really have said that?

"In two months, we rendezvous with the Kongo to pick up my chief surgeon, Lieutenant Commander Leonard McCoy." It took that long to drag him on board

kicking and screaming. He looked like a candidate for his own emergency team. Kirk sighed. For a down-home boy who said he didn't really belong in space, McCoy wasn't showing any more enthusiasm for mustering out than Kirk himself was.

The disembodied adolescent voice continued to call the roll. Kirk checked off the names mentally, adding a gold star beside many--too many. This one, dead. This one, alive, but his dreams, his naive wonder for exploration, dead, buried with the one who had been his friend. This one, crippled, desk job. That one, transferred, stress. Missing in action; posthumous medal of honor. One after another, crushed by the casual brutality of life in the service.

I've never apologized for any of my decisions, he thought. Maybe I should have.

Five years of this is too many. There must have been better lives than this. Other, better lives. "A beach to walk one," he said. "A flesh-and-blood woman." How long ago I dreamed that, and how long ago the dream became a dream instead of a goal.

Other, better lives.

His fingers tensed as he reached behind the stacks for another tape. For years he had not requested this one, never yielded to the temptation to view it. When he finally took it, just to hold the cassette in his hands as if it were a saint's bone that could heal him by touch he'd stowed it out of sight, though hardly out of mind.

He ejected the log tape and popped the other one into the machine. Five years of playing a part in Starfleet's grand dream. Don't I deserve a moment or two of dreaming my own dream?

Grainy gray images began to flicker on the screen.

Maybe it isn't too late. If I could cross the miles, back to the planet where it began, to the Guardian of Forever, and leap the years spanning our destinies--

He fiddled with the focus. The flickering light congealed into a mock-reality.

Edith, my beautiful Edith. I let you die to save the future. Lord help me, there are times when I think the future wasn't worth saving, Kirk brooded. Maybe it's not too late. We'll do it again. And this time, hang duty, hang the unborn generations, we have a right to be happy, don't we--?

Spock's voice pierced the miasma on screen. "Science log, supplemental. This crude tape was made in Earth year 1930, using--" the crisp voice paused, and continued drolly, "using stone knives and bearskins. It is also supplemented by images provided by the Guardian of Forever, of an alternate history of Earth briefly brought into existence when Dr. McCoy inadvertently changed history by saving the life of social worker and pacifist Edith Keeler.

"The 'history' shown here is now an anomaly, since Captain Kirk prevented McCoy's misguided heroism, and allowed Keeler to die in a traffic accident as fate demanded." Fate didn't demand a damn thing, Spock. You demanded it. Duty, whatever Duty is, demanded it. But one future is as good as another; it's the present that counts, the happy present we could have had. "Thus," Spock concluded, "history as we know it came to pass; but it is interesting to note that it might not have been so, and the nature of the differences."

Kirk did not want to see Edith's lovely doomed face, with knowledge and innocence burning together in her eyes as if unaware they were not supposed to coexist. Like her and me. We weren't supposed to be together either. Despite himself, he watched.

Newspaper headlines flashed; the fatal day came and departed with no mention of the "minor" tragedy. More images filled the screen, but as Edith dead had not been among them, neither was Edith alive. Impossible, Kirk thought, straining his eyes and slowing the tape. We know she would have been as pivotal to alternate history as to real history.

And the time that was not, except for one hallucinatory moment when love almost ruled the world, careened on across the screen.

Dark metal birds of prey scarred with swastikas wheeled in triumph above a

dying, gutted city. The Battle of Britain, but Britain lost.

Black-suited troopers knocked the cigarette holder from the lips of an angular man, and dragged him, blindfolded, from his wheelchair to face a firing squad. Victor's justice--the Nuremberg Trials, Kirk thought.

Coney Island turned into a concentration camp. Political dissidents hurled from the Brooklyn Bridge. Boy scouts turned from their knot-tying to practice the manly art of loading guns and kicking Jews.

Kirk's eyes were sharply turned to every horror, screening it out. Edith, I still don't see her--wait--

"Hold image," he snapped. "Amplify focus, augment, real-time playback."

And the face he had once known as Edith's, and recalled as beautiful, filled the screen. Deep shadows were engraved under the hollow eyes and the sculpted cheekbones threatened to break through the pasty skin clinging to them. She seems alive, but she looks like the walking dead.

"You should have gone with Mengele," Edith said. "You should have saved yourself."

The focus widened to include another shadow. McCoy huddled in a corner, ragged, bleeding, in the same wretched prisoner's rags as Edith. Behind her, in the squalid barracks, Kirk discerned two more shadows.

"I'm a doctor, not a butcher," McCoy said. "I don't care any more what they do to me."

Kirk saw his own face appear over Edith's shoulder. Two centuries ago, but that face is five centuries old in suffering. "it's all right, Bones. You can have my soup. I'm not hungry."

Spock's face appeared over Edith's other shoulder. His ears. what did those monsters do to his ears? "You may also have mine, Doctor. I have no stomach for broth. And being of a somewhat hardier constitution than Humans--"

McCoy rolled over on his face, and the rags of his shirt fell away to reveal the raw welts on his back. As Edith bent over him, Kirk could see a matching set of strips, and rubbed the nape of his own neck uncomfortably.

"They'll be coming for me any minute," McCoy said. "Let them take me. Shot today or starve tomorrow, I'd rather die than live in this world you made, Jim."

Edith sobbed, an awful dry rustling as if her shrunken heart had shifted in her wizened bosom. "You keep blaming Jim. It's my fault, not his. I and my grandiose starry-eyed idea that the Fuehrer wanted peace and would listen to reason." She buried her face in her bony hands. "I sometimes wish they'd come and kill me. They let me live because they know I suffer more knowing--oh, why didn't someone kill me before I had a chance to cause all this?"

The phantom Kirk grasped her elbows and opened his mouth. No, Kirk in his cabin, cried wordlessly, grasping the screen. Don't say it.

But he could not change history, not even false history. "You were supposed to," the shadow Kirk babbled. "You should have died. I saved you. I allowed you to be saved. I knew the future--I can't explain how. But for one moment time stopped, and in one hand I held destiny." Kirk clenched one fist, then the other. "And in the other, I held you." He opened one fist. "And when the time came to choose, I--I let destiny go. Because I love you."

Edith looked at Kirk, baffled. She turned to McCoy. He nodded. She turned to Spock. He nodded also. Bitterness froze any remaining light in her eyes into sharp steel.

"I guess it was inevitable," she said. "I've come to hate everything in life I once loved--my country, my cause, the sun itself because it wakes me up to face another day in Hell. I suppose it was inevitable that I would hate you too, sooner or later," she told Kirk. "You're right. I don't understand. But if what you've said is true, Jim..." she turned away.

"No," Kirk's image cried. "It wasn't supposed to be this way."

There was no other way it could have been.

A steady thud of jackboots underscored her torrent of reproaches.

"We're coming, you lazy swine," a voice rasped offscreen. "Work or die. If

we cannot use you as labor, we will use you as soap."

"He's sick," Edith called.

"A sick doctor," the voice laughed. "The epitome of uselessness. We will heal him with bullets. We will also give his bunkmates a dose of this excellent therapy. And then, we have a special prescription for you, woman."

"For God's mercy, enough," the real Kirk said. The computer did not recognize this as a command and continued to play.

The barracks door creaked open. A series of sinister clicks signaled the beginning of the end. Edith knelt by McCoy. Spock knelt by Edith.

"Stand aside, Jim," McCoy said. "You wanted this world, you made it, you live in it."

"Ready," the Kapo said. "Aim. Fi--"

"No!" Kirk howled, leaping from the bed.

The computer recognized the word, and the screen faded to black.

Kirk collapsed on the bed. A gust of stale air escaped his lungs in one tornado sweep. Relief burst to the surface of his confused thoughts. A nightmare. It didn't happen. It wasn't real.

Kirk wasn't sure how long he'd lain on the bunk before the yellow light blinked above the door. "Come in," he said.

Spock entered, McCoy close behind and bearing a flask. Both looked well-fed, dressed to the letter of regulation, and very real.

"I came to check on you," McCoy said, "and not incidentally to bring you this." He uncorked the Saurian brandy.

"Bridge reports situation normal, sir," Spock said. "Lieutenant Sulu has the con."

"Thank you, gentlemen. I commend your meticulous attention to duty," Kirk said. "And I could use a shot of that, for purely recreational purposes." He opened the wet bar by the bed and took out three glasses. "I assure you both I'm quite--quite myself now."

"You look as if you've been in another world," McCoy said. "I didn't see any actual pathological conditions on your scans, but my eyeball diagnosis indicates something's been wrong, and I'll match my eyeballs against a roomful of gadgets any day."

"I must agree you have not been your normal ebullient self," Spock said. "I believe the word the doctor used was 'mourning'."

Kirk rose, stretched, and savored every luxurious flexing of his unwasted frame. He turned his back, ostensibly to adjust his shirt, and palmed the tape. Then he slipped it behind the shelf, as far back as it would go. It fell, bounced, and slipped between the ledge and the bulkhead, invisible again and this time impossible to retrieve.

The captain took the bottle from McCoy and poured two glasses. "I suppose I have been a little sad lately. Only natural to mourn, when you think you've lost something."

McCoy took a sip and rolled it around his tongue. "Not bad, but it should have waited another two centuries to decant." He drained the glass. "I don't have two centuries to hang around waiting."

You can't know how close we came to losing two centuries, Kirk thought.

"And did you find what you thought you'd lost?" Spock inquired.

"Not exactly," Kirk said. "I found that what I thought I'd lost was something I never could have had in the first place. Cheers," he said, and drank deep.

Spock motioned McCoy to fill a glass for him, bringing a wry grin from the doctor. "I am not acquainted with Human emotions in a subjective sense," he said, "but in a purely factual sense, I too have recently experienced the sense of loss." His eyes met Kirk's. "I seem to be missing a log tape..."





Dining with the Devil



"When one is dining with the Devil,
one must use a long spoon."
— Old Earth proverb

"Captain's Log, Stardate 8201.82. The completion of our relief mission to the Sigma colonies marks the commencement of the fifth and final year of our mission. Though our logbook is far from closed, I count my command a success. We have gone to the edge of the galaxy; encountered many new races on uncharted planets, often befriending and sometimes liberating them--"

"If I were you, Jim, I'd strike that last entry. You call it liberation, the Prime Directive calls it interference."

"I think we can be proud of what we did for the Feeders of Vaal on Gamma Trianguli VI, the people of Yonada--you DO remember Yonada, don't you, Bones?--the people of Vendikar and Eminiar, of Beta III."

"Okay, don't play back the entire logbook. I merely point out that according to the rules you're supposed to leave them in their chains. You haven't been called on the carpet yet, but don't push your luck."

"Much as I hate to admit it," Spock said, "Dr. McCoy is correct."

"I knew it, Jim, you shouldn't have given him that brandy."

Kirk punched a button, backed up the tape and picked up his entry. "Met and, when necessary, defeated hostile forces. The Enterprise has made more than her share of contributions to scientific progress and interstellar amity, and, all prejudice aside, deserves her position as flagship of Starfleet."

"Aren't ye forgetting sommat, sir?" Scott said.

"Oh. Got you. I commend the fine performance of my entire crew, in particular my officers: Commander Spock, Science Officer and First Officer; Lieutenant Commander Scott, Chief Engineer; and Lieutenant Commander McCoy, Chief Medical Officer." He switched off the tape.

"Thanks for putting me last, as always. If it doesn't mean a raise, I'll skip the glory. Still, it doesn't hurt to get a nice piece of tin to pin on your chest."

"It's a fine log entry, Captain." Scott drained his glass for the fifth time. "But you do toot your own horn a bit loud."

Kirk reached over for Scott's glass to give him a refill. Spock put his hand over the mouth of the beaker. "Well, maybe I do, but experience tells me that if I don't do it, nobody else will."

"Ah, but there's a danger in it. If you build yourself up as miracle worker, sooner or later someone'll give you a miracle to work." The engineer was not entirely joking.

"Bring on your miracles," Kirk cried. "I'll give it my best shot. Who knows? We might even pull it off."

Spock scraped his chair on the floor, ostentatiously putting distance between himself and Kirk. "Sir, with all due respect, I do believe you're drunk."

"More high spirits than Saurian spirits. Don't worry. I can still run the ship." He picked another tape off the cluttered table. It had a glass ring on it. "Before the poker game, shall we hear the latest urgent message from the grand poohbahs of the Council?" Out came the log tape, in went the message. "New orders."

The Admiral's droning voice filled the room. Kirk sighed. A ship with the size and power of a small star, and 420 of the Fleet's best to man her, and all they could come up with was milk runs. Pick up personnel from U.S.S. Avenger for transporter refit; pick up guests at Starbase 8 for assistance with classified mission.

The pleasant haze around his brain dissolved. Classified?

For the first time since starting the tape, he paid attention to the screen. The tape was frozen, the Admiral cut off in mid-word, with the large red letters TOP PRIORITY CODE I CLASSIFIED across his face like a slap.

Kirk punched a button to kill the audio and switch to print. "You may stay if you choose, gentlemen, but I must ask you to move to the far end of the table. This IS eyes only, and I wouldn't want to break any rules." They complied.

Kirk read in silence, his face turning gray. He switched off the tape and yanked it from the slot.

"What is it, Jim? You look like you've aged five years in five minutes," McCoy said.

"I'll tell you when I'm allowed. The tape is quite clear on what I am allowed to reveal, and when," Kirk said stiffly. He felt like the fly trapped at the center of the spider web.

"I canna help but wonder if this is your miracle, Captain."

"It just may be, Scotty. It just may be."

♦♦♦

Alone in his cabin, Kirk played the Admiral's tape, this time with the voice added. Five run-throughs, and the damned message was still the same.

As the voice droned on he reached into the drawer above the headboard of the couch, and flung velvet-covered boxes one after another onto the coverlet. Palm Leaf Order of Axanar. Silver Palm with Cluster. Order of Commendation, Order of Merit. McCoy was right. Just shiny pieces of tin.

"Your penchant for unorthodox methods and your contempt of standard procedure is well-known," the voice went on. Boxes were piling up on the bed. Conspicuous Gallantry, first class. Ananar Medal, with Nova. With Nova! Could the Admiral know what he'd had to go through to get that Nova? Could he know anything of the life of the man on the line, catapulting across light-years, living by his wits and an occasional lucky break?

"I have strong personal feelings about the direction your career has taken, James," the Admiral's voice said. "You were such a promising cadet."

The boxes reached from Kirk's knee to his waist. Golden Sun of Honor. Golden Medal of Honor! "Do you hear that, you pompous idiot! You, who lost half your crew on your first command and had to be kicked upstairs! I'm a walking reproach to you. I command the ship you wanted and didn't deserve."

"The council has discussed it long and often with passion, Kirk," the voice said. "We cannot stand idly by while you ... you gallivant about the galaxy, blithely doing whatever you like, taking the most unpardonable risks, breaking every rule in the book. We need a 'team player' on the flagship of the fleet, not a maverick."

Whirling like a sudden duststorm, Kirk swept all the boxes to the floor. So

much for that, he thought. Starfleet was changing, and not for the better. He remembered being young, hopeful, fascinated with change, growth, potential, the infinite mystery of everything around him. Starfleet had been like that too, once. But before his eyes, the organization he'd been so proud to be part of had changed from the pliant sapling, yearning toward the light, to a thick, unbudgeable oak, rooted in petty promotion-seeking and crusted with the bark of protocol.

"Consider yourself on probation, Kirk."

He reached for a velvet box to throw at the screen. No, it would probably get back to the Admiral, and his days would be numbered, if they weren't already. The whistle of the intercom cut in, and Kirk was glad to have an excuse to silence the tape.

"Rendezvous with Avenger accomplished, sir. Our people are ready to come aboard. And, sir, they expect a full-dress welcome," Kyle said.

"Call Spock and McCoy to change and report at once. I'll be down in a second. Kirk out."

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"Standing by to receive Avenger personnel at your order, sir," Kyle said. Kirk started on seeing the familiar face above a civilian outfit. Kyle looked like one of the 20th-century novelty postcards people bought at resorts, sticking their heads above cardboard cutouts of a cowboy or a striptease queen. Kirk could not imagine a separate life for Kyle, one without the transporter controls; when he left, the machine might yank itself out of the floor and follow him back to Earth like a mechanical Saint Bernard.

"Looking forward to sabbatical, Mr. Kyle?" Kirk asked.

"Not really, sir. A few days planetside in Adelaide is one thing, fine as it goes. See the mum and dad, let a teddy wet on you once for nostalgia, and you're off. But a bloody year? An' they'll all tell me I've lost my accent from hanging around with that pommie bastard Scott, beg your pardon," Kyle said.

Kirk grinned. The fierce Highlander would take being called a bastard in stride, but heaven only knew how he'd take being called an Englishman.

Kyle pulled the controls. "Got 'em, sir." Kirk's smile grew even wider; this was almost enough to make up for Kyle's departure, if not for the miserable dressing-down on the tape.

"First Officer Kevin Thomas Riley of the U.S.S. Avenger, sir, requesting permission to come aboard. And I don't mind saying I'm glad to be back, sir."

"Permission granted—on one condition. No singing."

"Not a note, sir." Looking Riley over, Kirk was pleased. Callow and a bit bubbleheaded as an ensign, the young officer had filled a commander's uniform credibly, keeping the fire of youth without too much of its brashness. Kirk had never expected it, but for the first time he could envision Riley in command.

He turned to his other guest. "Welcome back, Janice."

He offered her his arm as she stepped off the platform. She ignored him.

"Why so formal, Jan?"

"I'm here to do a job, Captain. A specific job. I'll refit your transporter and be on my way."

She strode toward the door, Kirk in her wake. "Well, could you at least have dinner with me tonight?" Riley hung discreetly back, pretending to make small talk with Kyle.

"Business is business," she said. He touched her shoulder, and she winced.

"It was all so sudden," he said. "One day on the bridge of the Enterprise, the next day, I look up and you're gone. Why?"

Her eyes were moist, but her tone was hard. "You don't know, do you?" she said. "You really don't know."

"No, I don't know."

"And you never will figure it out. And that's why I had to go," she blurted, and fled the room."

Damn her, damn her orders, damn the mission, the ship, the fleet and myself, Kirk thought. The sooner she finished her work and got off the ship, the better.

The room was the same, but the camaraderie which had prevailed at the last meeting had vanished. Eventually, the admirals would get their hands on the tapes of this staff meeting, so each had to guard his words carefully.

McCoy fidgeted. "How many more times you going to ask us to get dressed up this week?"

"We have to make a good impression. We wouldn't want high command to think we take things too lightly. Any other comments off the record before I start the tape?"

"Aye. We've had classified missions before. This can't be more dangerous than stealing that cloaking device from the Romulans. We've kept our silence afore. But we never--"

"Never WHAT, Mr. Scott?"

"He means, Jim, that something else is going on here that you're not telling us."

"Indeed, Captain, I also sense something is amiss."

Kirk looked from face to face. Damn it, he'd worked too long with these three to be able to hide anything completely from them. But he couldn't tell them either."

"Wait until we've finished the briefing, and see if you all feel the same way," he said, and started the tape. "Captain's log, supplemental, code one, priority one, staff briefing. Enterprise assigned to pick up civilian personnel and proceed to third quadrant, Cynara system, planet Cynara."

"Third quadrant's over so close to the Klingons you can smell 'em," Scott said. "But they haven't caused a fuss in nearly two years. Bless me if I've seen a one of 'em. Are they causin' trouble now?"

"Oddly enough, no. At least, not the Empire itself, though our problem is indeed a Klingon."

"What's Cynara, Jim? I've never heard of that one."

"Yes, you have, Doctor, but you don't recognize it by that name." Spock summoned up a star chart on the screen, which showed the Federation/Klingon territorial boundaries as a thin green strip. One small star lay directly on the strip; a single planet circled the star, the orbit described by a broken line, falling half in Federation territory and half in Empire space.

"You don't have to explain, Spock," McCoy said. "I can see why we might want to look in on Cynara."

"Our visit," the Vulcan continued, "is seventy-five years overdue. Only one terran exploratory voyage was made to Cynara. The ship returned with most of the crew dead or dying. The samples of flora, fauna and minerals the ship brought back remain among the most unique and potentially the most useful ever gathered. The ship's logs and reports, many of which are still highly classified, indicate that what they brought back may be only the tip of an iceberg. If this is correct, Cynara is a world of wonders."

"And the Klingons don't want it?" McCoy asked.

"They do want it, as do we. Either side would be foolish not to. But considering that the planet is in enemy territory for half its year, either side would be even more foolish to try to take it."

"And that, gentlemen, is the crux of the matter," Kirk cut in. "For the past two years somebody has been living there. Since neither side will approach, it has become a 'safe house.' The only people who will live there are people who can't live anywhere else. This is the last stop for every rogue, villain, cheat, murderer and traitor in the galaxy."

"Of course I know the planet," McCoy said. "Everyone's heard of Limbo. At least as a rumor—but I didn't know it actually existed."

"It's all too real. Limbo began as an outpost, only outcasts living in the debris of their ships. Two years ago, things changed when a leader came to Limbo—now there is a government of sorts."

Kirk nodded and Spock changed the picture on the screen, revealing the saturnine face of a Klingon. "This is Kobec," Kirk said. "Two years ago the

Empire drove him into exile. We still don't know why. But, knowing how the Empire operates, it must have been something pretty dire. He is now the ruler of this world."

"God help us," Scott said.

"God help them AND us. Nobody can afford to have him playing King-of-the-Hill on Limbo, especially in the light of who's playing with him."

"I see. We're going to overthrow him," McCoy said. "Right?"

"Wrong. It's a free planet, Bones. We are going to approach Kobec as the legitimate monarch of a legitimate government--" McCoy drew an astonished breath-- "and we are going to negotiate with him. Our goal is to work out a deal giving Federation explorers and scientists access to the planet."

"But how do you dicker with a creature like him?" Scott said. "Even before the Klingons had their fill of him, he wasn't exactly someone I'd like to meet in a dark alley, and I doubt he's improved."

"We are not going to dicker. That's what the civilians are for. Our spokesman at the bargaining table is going to be Paolo Delgado, president of Associated Intergalactic Merchants, Inc."

"That blowhard."

"You know him, Bones?"

"I met him once, five years ago," McCoy said uncomfortably. "He didn't impress me then."

"They say he could talk a sun out of going nova. He and his chief aide will be coming aboard at 0900. All we have to do is get them there, and put official approval on the bargain they work out for us."

Kirk tried to crack a smile. "Well, that doesn't seem so classified-top secret and threatening, does it."

"I repeat my previous opinion," McCoy said. "Something else is going on here that you're not telling us."

"I concur," said Spock.

"I suppose ye have your reasons," Scott shrugged.

Yes, he'd definitely been hanging around too long with these guys, Kirk thought. He slammed the table with his fist.

•••

Rand slammed the console with her fist. Damn you, cooperate! How did such a persnickety piece of machinery ever become standard issue on starships?

Not that she should complain. After things had become too complex for her to handle personally, she had taken refuge in the complexity of transporter mechanisms. Since the machines were both indispensable and impossible, it had made her one of the most desirable women in the service, in a purely professional sense.

She supposed it was her fate to wrestle with intransigence. At least a machine could be rewired. You couldn't do that with a man. But neither could you kiss a machine, nor could you unlock your cabin door to it in the artificial twilight of a shipboard night.

Well, she wasn't a yeoman anymore. She wouldn't make a yeoman's mistakes. That cabin door was staying locked.

Rand poked her probe further into the hatch. Sparks spat back at her. This assignment was going to take longer than she considered comfortable.

•••

"I still think we should just blast 'em out of the sky and be done with it," Scott said. "I'm not usually violent man, but..."

"We have our orders," Kirk said, "and they will be followed to the letter. Down to the last comma and period. Period."

"We have them, sir," Rand said. "Ready to beam aboard on your order."

"Energize."

The transporter beam blinked and coalesced into the forms of a woman and a man. At least, that's what Kirk thought they must be. But if this was what civilians looked like nowadays, he'd spent too much time in the service.

She stepped down from the platform. "Commander Hatfield of the merchant

vessel James Oglethorpe, of Affiliated Interplanetary Merchants."

Taking in the lady at a glance, Kirk wasn't sure he liked what he saw. Oh, she was attractive, in a hard, Valkyrie sort of way. And whatever assets she had, that uniform--my god, could it be standard issue for A.I.M.?--made the most of it, and rather more. What little there was of it clung tight, pulled down by a tawdry junkyard of minor medals from a dozen tinpot rulers in out-of-the-way pockets of the universe. A long braid of chestnut hair reached over her shoulder and down to the end of her neckline, which barely met with the beginning of the slit in her skirt. Kirk wondered just what she bargained with.

Then he caught her eyes. She gave nothing away. The eyes were an ice-blue barrier across which passed nothing but anger and avarice. He wished he knew why he did not want her on his ship.

He wanted her companion even less. The dark man-mountain reminded him too much of Khan in the renaissance perfection of his masses of muscle. No, not so much Khan. There was no fire in his eyes--in fact, not much of anything there. She beckoned, and he lumbered down, utterly under the whip of the flamboyant lady.

"And this is Paolo Delgado, president of A.I.M. I am his chief aide and spokesman."

McCoy had said Delgado wasn't the kind to need a spokesman. It was too late now to get rid of them even if he could, but he was sorry they'd come aboard. Maybe he ought to let Starfleet cashier him, if this was what they wanted to inflict on him.

"I thought you said he was the talkative type," Kirk hissed. He was talking to air; McCoy had shifted to stand behind him, putting distance between himself and the visitors.

"Clearly, he's changed."

Kirk summoned his authoritative manner and extended a hand. "I am Captain--"

"We know who you are, Kirk," Hatfield said crisply. "We know who the others are also. We were briefed very thoroughly, apparently more so than you. We are displeased. We had specifically requested the Avenger." Each word came out with a sharp clip, as if she were pruning them from an overgrown bush.

"Madam," Spock ventured, "I had been informed you were a native of Earth."

"I am a Terran, Mr. Spock, as is Paco. Why?"

"I am interested in your speech patterns," Spock said, raising his eyebrows in the Captain's direction. "You have no Terran accent. You speak with perfect precision and entirely correct grammar, as I do."

"I wasn't aware that was a fault."

"No, it is not. Mine is the typical speech pattern of one who learned English as a second language, one who is not a native speaker."

She colored. "I don't suppose you've ever read 'Pygmalion'?"

"I am not acquainted with that piece of literature, beyond knowing it exists," Spock said. Animosity crackled between them. If Spock was put off enough by her to display his aversion openly, Kirk thought, there must be something there to justify it.

"I suggest you read it. It's about a young Earth woman who trains herself to speak without an accent so she can be successful in the world of commerce. I took a leaf from Eliza Doolittle's book, and it has served me very well," she said. Then she turned to Kirk. "I expect no further rudeness from your subordinates. We have come a long way to pull the Federation's chestnuts out of the fire, and I doubt if the paltry handful of credits we have been offered for this job will compensate for the time away from A.I.M. business. We are very hungry, and we expect dinner."

"We have planned a formal dinner in the reception hall, after the tour of the ship."

"Dispense with the tour, Captain. I am familiar with engines, and one engine is like another. Unless, of course, your engines are in such a state of neglect as to be dangerous, in which case I offer to assist in repairing them."

"The day you set foot in MY engine room, ye gormless galoot..." Scott

muttered.

"I can find my cabin by myself. You may serve dinner at your convenience, as long as it is soon. Come, Paco." She swept past them, the dark giant in tow.

"Wait," Kirk said. "You have to report for a physical." She turned.

"There will be no physical," she said, and they swept out.

No one spoke for a long moment. Kirk could guess what they were thinking.

"Reactions, gentlemen."

"If she were not a lady--nae, she is not a lady. But if she were not a woman, I'd deck her one. She's loathesome."

"Well, loathesome's a strong word, Scotty."

"Ach, Doctor, don't tell me you like that pair."

"I never said that. Running around the galaxy, spilling out of her clothes, dressed like something off Wrigley's Pleasure Planet!"

"Why, Bones, I never heard you object to that before."

"You like her, Jim?"

"What I like or dislike is not important. They have been thrust on us by the Federation. They must have had their reasons."

"I am still puzzled by her lack of accent, Captain. And she refuses to have a regulation physical," Spock cut in.

"Are you saying she's not what she claims to be?"

"I have reached no conclusions. I merely indicate inconsistencies. They may prove to be significant."

Kirk spread his hands in a gesture of frustration. "All right, we'd better get to the dining room before they start breaking chairs. Oh, and you can stop to get out of these dress uniforms first. At least someone at the table can be sensibly dressed."

♦♦♦

Hatfield smoothed the pillow sham. Twin beds. Well, she could guess whose doing that must be. "Paco, move. You'll crumple it," she said.

He rose, slowly, and stood. "Sit in the chair," she said, and he moved slowly, without volition, to the chair. Nowadays, every move of his was a supreme effort against inertia--of hers, against despair.

He looked up. "Bed?" he said, but no passion stirred in his eyes.

"No, food. Then bed," she answered, sighing. At least that much of Paolo Delgado was still there.

"No, bed." A note of plaintive insistence crept into the flat voice.

She turned to him. Every once in a great while since their trading voyage to Limbo, a flash of Paco would leap between them, a bit of static electricity barely recalling the man she'd known, the laughing buccaneer who'd introduced himself by throwing her over his shoulder and hauling her bodily from the classroom. He, unleashing the gypsy in her, and she, cultivating the businessman in him, had parlayed his ragtag fleet of converted scows into the most profitable venture in the galaxy.

His mind was not destroyed, she reminded herself. At least, as far as she knew. It was controlled, and whatever is in bondage can be released.

She whispered his name, but the spark, if it had not been entirely in her wishful thoughts, had died. Her golem-lover sat barely aware of his own existence, much less of any prior, greater self, "Bed," he repeated absently.

She thought, and lay back on the pillow. This was still Paco, whom she had never been able to refuse.

"Come," she said, and unfastened her gown.

♦♦♦

This time, it was Kirk's turn to cover the wine flask. Spock was showing no effects of having had three glasses, but he was half Human, and there was no point in experimenting now. What happens when a Vulcan has one too many?

It was easy to find out what happens when a Human has one too many. He had the sick feeling he was looking at two textbook cases. Scotty, generally a jovial drunk, had retreated into Scottish dourness. McCoy was no longer a casual drinker,

but a grimly determined one, not only out of character but out of line.

But nothing had happened at table--at least, not so far--to justify anyone's misery. The guests had eaten with fastidious manners but at Warp 12, leaving no time for conversation between bites. Delgado was on his fourth helping, Hatfield on her third.

Hatfield placed her fork at the side of her plate and dabbed her lips with her napkin. "Not bad for K-rations, Captain," she said. "Dessert?"

McCoy leaned forward. "You might note that the rest of us are not finished eating."

Her glare was intended to freeze him, but he plunged ahead. "In case you've forgotten, in civilized society it is customary to wait until everyone else is finished."

She turned to Kirk. "I expect you to discipline this man at once, if there is discipline aboard your ship at all. His manners--"

"MY manners! Now, you listen here, young lady. You weren't brought up in a barn!"

"Fat lot you would know about how I was brought up," she snapped.

Kirk waved a conciliatory hand. "Bones, Bones. Such a little thing to argue about."

"Kirk, aboard the James Oglethorpe, this man would go to the brig at once."

"Well, thank god I'm not on the Oglethorpe! Stupid name for a ship," McCoy muttered.

Kirk assumed his best stiff-necked pose. "I take disciplinary measures as I feel appropriate. The doctor serves under my command. MY command," he repeated, hoping his friend would get the message and shut up. "You may do as you will with him if he ever serves on your ship."

"I would not have this man on my ship."

McCoy rose from his chair. His voice went up an octave and several decibels. Spock was watching with impassive interest.

"You and that hulk think you can come parading in here--"

"That's enough, Bones, and I mean it." McCoy sat down again. It took a lot to push Kirk over the line, but it was easy to tell when he'd gone too far. "Confined to quarters until I say otherwise."

"But--"

"Go now, before I pitch you into the soup." He turned to Hatfield. "I'd like to pitch you in too; you're two of a kind."

"Bed?" Paolo Delgado said.

"You may have dessert sent to our quarters," she said. "Call me when you decide to be a captain instead of a zookeeper."

She nodded at her quiet companion, and they swept out.

"Fine thing, her talking about zookeepers, and leading that gorilla around," Scott said.

"That's enough of that, Scotty, or I'll confine you, too. You, Doctor, get out of here. I don't want to see you again until I send for you. If I do, it really will be the brig." McCoy studied the tablecloth. "I know you were provoked--though I don't think the irritation justified the fuss. Just the same, mister, it's way past time we re-established just where friendship ends and authority begins."

McCoy nodded. Kirk had wanted to give him a friendly pat on the back, but the doctor hurried out. "I think dinner is over," he said. "Let's get back on course after this brief intermission for civil war."

Scott hauled himself heavily out of his chair. Spock did not rise.

"Captain, a word with you?"

"Yes, Spock?"

"I assume you will visit Dr. McCoy. I request permission to accompany you."

"Spock, it's bad enough I have to bawl him out at all. Let's not make it a public spectacle."

"Postpone it, then. Give me two hours."

"You sound like you're onto something."

"By Human standards of polite behavior, she is obnoxious, and her companion unfathomable," the first officer said. "However, I have reason to suspect there is another factor at work here. Allow me two hours to investigate further. We shall meet in the briefing room, and if I have nothing to confirm my hypothesis, you may proceed."

"I know McCoy's behavior was at least in part due to over-imbibing," Spock continued. "But since Commander Hatfield and her companion arrived, not only he, but you and I have been ill at ease," Spock continued. Kirk looked askance at the image of Spock ill at ease--and admitting it. "Certain individuals on the Enterprise seem to have a natural antipathy to her."

"Do you think it might be biochemical?"

"I have a very strong theory, which should not take more than two hours to confirm or disprove. And that is all I shall say."

Kirk smiled for the first time since the guests had boarded. "One thing I've learned is not to get in your way. You have those two hours."

"There is one favor you might do for me, though. Call Hatfield and see if she would reconsider about the physical examination. Tell her Chapel will administer it." Kirk nodded.

♦♦♦

"One more test for you, Commander. Your companion is excused," Chapel said.

"Well, are we acceptable? No loathesome diseases to contaminate your gallant crew?"

Stripped of her regalia and clad in a robe, Hatfield seemed much more likeable to Chapel. She sounded much more like a woman and less like the ship's computer. Her painstaking enunciation had begun to slur and syncopate; vowels lost their clang, consonants their iron edge.

"You're both so healthy it's sickening. What a bore patients like you can be." This woman already felt like an old friend. Chapel couldn't figure out why nobody could get along with her. Or why Hatfield could not get along with anybody, for that matter; Chapel had met no one in Starfleet easier to get along with than her captain and her immediate superior, McCoy.

"Next time we come, we'll bring something exotic you can work on, like Collosian pneumocrystallization, or Bartlett's syndrome."

"You know a bit for a layman, Commander."

"That's to be expected," she said. Chapel looked puzzled. "Somebody has to be ship's doctor. Merchant service doesn't pay as well as Starfleet, so I've had to do it myself." Hatfield ran a hand over the diagnostic panel, and the machine beeped in time with her heartbeat. "My, what won't they think of next. All this fancy stuff. Nice toys. Still, I find I do very well without it. Machines aren't what gets a patient well."

Chapel prepared a suction hypo. "You could explore it, if you find it that interesting. I can arrange a visit any time. You're always welcome here."

The razor precision came back into Hatfield's voice. "I have no desire to be welcome here, even if I were. Let us finish the final test and get it over with."

Two can play at this game, Chapel thought, and donned her own no-nonsense mask. "Bare your arm again, please. We need a tissue sample. Just a cell or two from the forearm, you won't miss it. Relax the muscle." A hiss, a quick pump of the aspirating hypo, and it was done. "That didn't hurt, did it?"

"It certainly did. May I ask what this invasion of my body was intended to prove?"

"DNA analysis. Mr. Spock's request."

"I assure you I am Human." Which is more than I can say for your Vulcan; you love him, don't you? Hatfield thought.

Chapel felt a sudden desire to get this woman out of Sickbay--now, at once, hang the exam.

"Do all visitors have their DNA typed?" Hatfield inquired as she slipped back into her costume.

"Yes," Chapel lied.

"Come, Paco," the commander said to her companion, and he trudged along behind her.

Chapel did not turn around, but as soon as she heard the swish of the door closing, she switched on the intercom and tuned in Hatfield's cabin.

"Mr. Spock, I'm done with them."

"Did you get the sample?"

"Not without an argument."

"This was as I expected. The lady wants to be found out for what she is, or she would not have allowed it at all."

"What is she?"

"Analyze the sample. I have found what I wanted here, and it is prudent I leave before they return. I shall inform you when I have confirmed my theory."

♦♦♦

As Chapel ran the sample through the computer, Spock tapped the top of the holocube. Humans were fond of such mementos, and what their possessions said about them was frequently more significant than what they said about themselves. As one of their more prominent philosophers had expressed it, where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

A miniature family scene materialized. There was no mistaking one figure: even shrunken to homunculus size, two decades younger and flat-chested, the child was Hatfield, and the surroundings Earth. He tapped again and again, and more minuscule family scenes sprang to view.

"Are you finished, Chapel?" he called.

"Yes, sir. It's all done. I only glanced at it, but she was telling the truth; she is Human."

"That is not surprising. That is not what I needed to know." He tapped the cube off, then leaned over her shoulder, pushing buttons. "There--an irregularity."

"I've seen that pattern before," she said. "But is it significant?"

"Definitely." He punched a few more buttons. "I require access to classified personnel files: Captain Kirk, Doctor McCoy, Lieutenant Uhura and my own. Will you clear me, please?"

She pressed her palm-print on the identiplate. "I'm going to have to inform the captain of your request--purely as a matter of procedure."

"He will not object. Especially not if I find what I'm looking for," Spock said.

Chapel yielded the seat to him. She headed back to her desk, where her eye caught the holocube. She tapped it two or three times in quick succession. Probably brought it in absent-mindedly, she thought. I'll return it on my way to the mess hall.

Spock's brows knit as he pored over the comparisons, matching Hatfield's data with that of the officers. On the one hand, his detective work had been worthy of Sherlock Holmes. On the other, he wished he had at least another two hours to figure out how to deal with it without jeopardizing the entire mission.

♦♦♦

Hatfield wandered alone in Wonderland. She had not specifically asked for the exclusive use of the recreation room, but in less than five minutes after she walked in, all the crewmen had cleared out.

Clear, blossom-scented blue skies enveloped her. She sat down under a tree which wasn't really there--she knew that, certainly she was not quite so dimwitted as the crewmen who permitted themselves to be lost in the illusions. Sighing, she threw a switch to banish the artificial shore leave.

She stripped off her gewgaws and bound up her hair, and began a workout. Springing and bouncing at random around the gymnastics equipment, caroming off the padded walls and floors like a hallucinating rabbit, might work off some of the hostility.

Ten thousand credits had seemed a good price for A.I.M.'s services to Starfleet. She had to go through with the dreaded return to Limbo, for Paco's

sake, so she had thought she might as well hitch a ride. Damnation! She forgot the first rule of bargaining: any deal which sounds too good to be true, usually is. If she'd known it was the Enterprise, she wouldn't have taken it for mining rights to the entire quadrant.

She stopped her frenetic kicks in mid-air, landing on her feet. Her ankles ached. Without turning, she said, "Enter, Vulcan."

"Fascinating," said the voice, directly behind her. Spock, in fatigues, dropped cross-legged at her feet. She sat, to meet him eye-to-eye. "You knew it was I without looking."

"So?"

"Your DNA confirms that you are a low-level telepath."

She sighed. "I should have known there wasn't anything I could keep from a Vulcan."

"That explains why certain members of the crew dislike you," he continued. "You project your hostility. The sensitives among us pick it up. Were you to change your attitude, you would find that your time on the Enterprise would be much easier."

She crossed her arms. "I doubt that."

"You have a gene for this gift, very pronounced. Mr. Scott does not; that is why he is indifferent to your bombast--except, of course, when you insult his engines. You have not met Lieutenant Uhura yet, which is just as well, for she would respond to the waves of antipathy washing from you. And, of course, the captain, and Doctor McCoy, from whom you inherited this talent."

Hatfield scrambled to her feet. "If you're going to speak of him, save your breath."

Spock caught her ankle, and she crashed to the floor. "If we are to complete this mission, sooner or later we must speak of him, Joanna McCoy." He flipped her over onto her back and sat on her, lightly. She punched him a couple of times, then relaxed.

"I didn't give you leave to call me that," she said. The staccato precision dropped away, and her magnolia-scented drawl crept back.

"Nevertheless, that is your name. I assume the 'Hatfield' is to aggravate your father, or perhaps to remind yourself of the break you have tried to make with your family. DNA does not cooperate with such efforts to remake oneself."

"I thought we were going with the Avenger," she said miserably. "I didn't know he'd be here. I don't consider myself his daughter."

"We are who we are," Spock said. For a moment, an image of a stern and silent figure in ambassadorial robes of state rose before him, contrasted with the austere uniform and sad, round eyes of McCoy's softly furrowed face. Scylla and Charybdis; if we do not crash headlong into the truth of who we are, we are sucked down in the trap of trying to avoid it. "And our fathers," he said, "will be who they are as well."

"I have no desire to deal with that."

"You must deal with it. He cannot stay locked in his cabin forever. He is the one who belongs on this ship; he is your host. And he cares about you."

She struggled to push him off, vainly. "Oh, fine an' dandy, Mr. Vulcan Stone-Face Philosopher. Our fathers will be who they are, huh? Well, YOU tell me who he is! I never saw enough of him to know. He went star-hopping before I was even out of the sandbox. When I was too little and too dumb to know better, I used to wait for those birthday cards. Some years, they didn't even come. I didn't know if he lived or died. After a time, I didn't much care."

"Many times he has come close to death. That is the lot of a Starfleet officer," Spock said. "And if he died, and you had cared? Perhaps he was trying to spare you the trauma."

"I was gullible enough to try to patch it up once. It was a fiasco. No more tries for me, thanks."

"Perhaps you should have left your, ah, traveling companion at home that time. Fathers rarely approve of the men their daughters choose, having been young men

themselves. It is not logical, but Humans rarely are."

"I think this has gone far enough. Let me up."

"If I do, your next step should be to go directly to his cabin. I guarantee you he will let you in."

An idea came into her head. He picked it up at once. "If you do, I shall in return arrange for further tests of your telepathic abilities."

"That would be a fine bargain. I'll consider it."

♦♦♦

McCoy lay on his back in the darkened cabin, counting imaginary flies on the ceiling. Less than a week ago he'd been complaining about never having time to read the "New England Journal of Medicine." Now he had the time, but not the heart.

The light above his door pulsed a pleasant yellow. He wasn't sure if he should accept the visitor. Then again, it might be Jim, to tell him his time in the dog house was up and he could return to duty. He wasn't sure he wanted to hear that. He switched on the intercom.

"Chapel, Doctor."

"Come on in," he said, and turned on the lights. "Something wrong in Sickbay?"

"Oh, no. I just came to return this to you." She held out the holocube. "You left it lying on a lab table."

"Thank you very much, except it isn't mine," he said.

"It must be yours," Chapel said. She set it down on his knees and tapped it. A tiny three-dimensional portrait of the young Leonard McCoy, walking a fence on a Georgia farm, sprang to view within the cube. Above it, like skywriting, hovered the handwritten words: "Our Leonard, getting bigger every day," and an old Earth date.

McCoy tapped it again several times, then handed it back to her. "You found it in Sickbay? When?"

"Less than a half-hour ago."

"I haven't been there since before that wretched dinner. That's nearly two hours ago."

The yellow light blinked again. "What is this," he said wearily, "a convention hall? Okay, come in. The more the merrier."

Spock entered. He caught sight of the holocube. As soon as McCoy saw him, he understood. "Spock. You're just in time to return this to its rightful owner. I assume you're the one who lifted it, with your usual Vulcan deviousness." He sighed. "Why didn't you just ASK me?"

"You would not have told me," he replied.

"Excuse me," Chapel said. "Does everyone know what's going on but me?"

"There's nothing to know," McCoy said. "Who's minding the store? You'd better get back to work. Thanks for the visit."

"We have nothing to discuss." He handed Spock the holocube. "Quick, before she notices it's gone."

Chapel looked from one to the other. "You two can fight it out yourselves. It's clear nobody trusts me," she said, and left.

Spock turned to McCoy as soon as the door closed. "This was merely circumstantial evidence. The DNA samples are a perfect match. She is indeed her father's daughter, right down to the inherited talent for telepathy."

McCoy's face was graven in stone. "Don't pin that on me. You know I have the telepathic sensitivity of a potato."

"I know you believe that, and as long as you refuse to develop it, you will. But the potential is there, and it will surface. I have mind-melded with you often enough to know what is in your head. And, like it or not, Doctor, you use that maverick gene."

"Nonsense."

"I have found three such low-level telepaths among the higher ranks of the crew: yourself, the captain, and Lieutenant Uhura," Spock said. "Consider. What

lends our captain his power of leadership? The lieutenant her gift for languages? Or your 'bedside manner'? Intelligence, character, training, experience, certainly cannot be discounted. But all these will not make a Chekov, fine officer though he may be, into a Kirk; nor, for all her other gifts, a Chapel into a McCoy."

"Don't try to thaw me out with compliments. It won't work."

Spock ignored him, wrapped up in his theory. "Nor could every trader enjoy the success of a Joanna McCoy Hatfield. I believe the extra factor is low-level telepathy, operating on the subconscious level. Captain Kirk thinks, 'Trust me. Follow me.' Lieutenant Uhura thinks, 'Understand me, comprehend my words.' You think, 'Believe I can heal you, desire to live.' Hatfield thinks, 'Compromise. Be agreeable.' On the most basic level, these messages are picked up and acted upon. The crew offers its loyalty. The alien understands, the patient recovers, the merchant lowers his price."

McCoy drew his knees up under his chin. "Now, look, Spock. I know I've said I was born to be a doctor, but whatever I may be, I made myself. This whole idea would be spooky, if it weren't so absurd."

"Say what you will about your own telepathy--"

"ALLEGED telepathy."

"Very well, alleged. But hers is very real. She believes in it, she is aware of it, and it is turning the crew against her. I do not generally interfere in the rather messy personal lives of fellow officers. But I recommend you and she arrive at some kind of understanding for the duration of the mission, or her projections of hostility will make the mission difficult, if not impossible."

The light above the door blinked again. "For god's sake!" McCoy barked into the intercom, "who the hell is it and what do you want now?"

"This is your captain, in case you've forgotten me. And until you decide you're in a better mood, your confinement to quarters is extended. I'll be back when we reach the planet. Don't bother opening the door. I have a meeting with Spock, and even if I wanted to stay, I can't. Kirk out." The yellow light died.

"You won't say anything to him, will you, Spock? At least, not yet. I'd like to talk it over with him in my own way, in my own time."

Spock rose. "I shall consider this conversation confidential for the time being. I must go. I shall be late for the meeting as it is, and I shall have to come up with a good excuse."

♦♦♦

"Approaching planet, sir."

"Assume standard orbit, Mr. Sulu. Lieutenant, open hailing frequencies."

Uhura pursed her lips as she plugged into the board. What had the recruiting officer promised her so long ago? Adventure, challenge, exotic lands and alien friends. What did she get? An endless round of opening hailing frequencies, the technological equivalent of picking cotton. And nobody ever looked at her legs. No wonder Rand had transferred.

Kirk rose, stretched, and crossed over to the board. McCoy, finally back on duty, and Spock dutifully followed him.

"What's the matter, sir, did I do it wrong?" she asked, icicles dripping from each word. "Forgive me, I'm new at this."

"I'm sure you could do it in your sleep, Lieutenant," Kirk said amiably. Uhura swiveled her chair. "You probably do do it in your sleep. One of the disadvantages of Starfleet. We keep pretty women chained to a console, where we can't even see their legs."

Uhura preened and crossed her legs to give him a better look. "I know what the 'fifth-year you-never-take-me-anywhere blues sound like, Lieutenant," Kirk continued. "I was there myself as a junior officer. You can go on the next one," he said. If there IS a next one, he thought. May the Admiral roast in hell.

"Take my word for it, you're better off staying up here on this one," McCoy interjected.

"Besides," Kirk said, "you'll get all the excitement you can handle when you

have a command of your own."

For once, the mistress of language had no words at her command. She murmured a thank-you in Swahili and turned back to her board. No wonder Rand came back.

Commander Hatfield stepped out of the lift, the impassive Delgado beside her like an oversized shadow. The effect was as if someone had fired a pistol in the midst of a New Year's Eve party. Kirk returned with a harrumph to his chair, McCoy rigid at attention behind him.

Uhura frowned. "No response, sir. I thought they were expecting us."

Hatfield crossed to the board. Uhura yielded it to her at once. "Again, Captain, you have not done your homework. Limbo has no subspace radio. Try old-fashioned frequency-modulated radio."

In a moment, she had the board sputtering. Harsh barks of Klingonese spat out across the bridge. "That's our host?" McCoy asked. He doesn't sound too gracious."

Hatfield motioned to Uhura to take over the board. "Put me on two-way," she said. Uhura waited for a "please," and when that was clearly not forthcoming, sullenly flipped a switch.

"Your Lordship, this is Hatfield of A.I.M., please respond," she said. Another burst of static and Klingonese ensued. "Please speak English, My Lord. The crew knows no Klingonese.

"Hatfield," the voice said, "This is Kobec, absolute monarch of this world. I had expected your return, but hardly so soon."

"You've been here before?" Kirk asked, sotto voce.

"A.I.M. is the first and to date the only commercial enterprise to visit Limbo," she said. "Why do you think Starfleet called us?" She turned her attention back to the disembodied voice. "I had not expected my return either, but I am here."

"You know procedure. You may beam down your merchandise for inspection at will."

"Request you lower your shields to permit a landing party. I and the officers of the U.S.S. Enterprise desire a personal audience."

"Ah, the Enterprise! I was not aware I deserved such an honor. In recognition of this, you may bring a maximum of three with you. Follow the usual two-phase procedure. Kobec out."

"Hatfield out." She strode to the life. "Anytime, Captain," she said. "Please bring only senior officers. I would not want to insult the monarch. Dress uniforms are optional."

"Spock, Bones, let's go," Kirk said. Spock looked at McCoy. "I take it you have not had your discussion. Your 'own good time' is now too late."

McCoy crossed back to the communications console. "Want to teach me to open hailing frequencies, so I can stay behind once in a while?"

The four crowded into the lift. Hatfield squeezed into the corner farthest from McCoy, and found herself belly-to-belly with Spock.

"What is the 'two-phase procedure'?" Kirk asked.

"Limbo is shielded by force-fields of a nature unknown to Federation science," she said. "Non-organic matter with no energy charge above a certain level can pass through. Most machinery, for instance, as long as it is not operative."

"Could a phaser pass through?" Kirk asked.

"Negative, Captain. A key component in the phaser's power source is organic. The phaser's power, and beams from the ship, would be absorbed by the force-field. All organic matter is either repelled or destroyed, living or non-living. It is a most effective defense; you cannot circumvent it nor batter through it."

"We know of no such device developed by the Empire," Spock said.

"Kobec didn't either. Whatever race lived on the planet left it behind when they destroyed themselves. Most of the planet is overgrown with vegetation, but there are some ruins. The exiles live in the most habitable city, evidently once the capital."

"About this force-field," Kirk prompted.

"Yes. He has one around the planet itself, and another around the city. He can create them at will of any size. Step one, he will lower the planet's field while leaving the field around the city intact. Step two, he will replace the field around the planet, and, if he is satisfied we have no tricks up our sleeves, he will admit us to Pandemonium."

"Pandemonium?" Kirk said. This whole thing was sounding more and more bizarre by the minute.

"A private joke by the first exiles there, who borrowed it from Milton. It means, 'all the demons.' An apt description," Hatfield said.

"He has this fancy gadget, but no subspace radio?" McCoy interjected. Hatfield ignored him and continued to address Kirk as if he had been the one to ask.

"Kobec was able to bring very little into exile with him except his own skin, and one aide," she said. "You need not worry about his capability to attack your ship, Captain, since he has none. Not even the greediest trader would ever sell him weapons." If we had, she thought, I might still have Paco.

The lift opened, and they filed into the transporter room. "Just the same, we're bringing phasers," Kirk said.

"He will think you distrust him."

"He will be right."

"Starfleet regulations mandate at least one phaser per landing party, fully charged, when entering non-Federation territory," Kirk insisted. If he had to stick by regulations, at least once in a while they should work in his favor.

"All right," she conceded, "one phaser. Only one. And keep it out of sight."

"One phaser, one tricorder, one communicator. The minimum."

"Captain, surely we shall also need life-support suits. A planet orbiting in Limbo's trajectory should be below freezing for two seasons of its year, and well above Human comfort levels for the opposite two."

"It is not, though, Spock," Hatfield said. "You will be quite comfortable as you are. Limbo is temperate year-round, maintaining a temperature of 20 to 30 degrees Celsius."

Spock raised both eyebrows so high they disappeared under his hair. "That," he said, "is flatly impossible."

"According to the laws of aerodynamics, a bumblebee cannot fly. But it does. Limbo is infinitely more impossible than the bumblebee, in many ways," she said. And, like the bumblebee, it may sting us if we are not careful."

She ascended the platform. The three men, checking their kits one last time, followed.

"May all go well with it," Scott said.

"I, too," Rand said.

"It must," Hatfield said. "For if it does not, you cannot bring us back." And the three disappeared.

•••

"It's Xanadu," Kirk breathed. "It's the stately pleasure dome."

"It's less impressive than you think, Captain," Hatfield said. "It is a noble ruin, but a ruin nonetheless. Inside, most of it is rather primitive."

"Somewhat baroque," Spock said.

"Gingerbread castle—with a witch or two in it, probably," McCoy added.

They stood at the bottom of the stone staircase to the city gates. Beyond, above the walls, spires and turrets twisted like living things flailing out in death-agonies. Windows blinked sightlessly. Pandemonium indeed, Kirk thought, The last remnant of a civilization mad enough to destroy itself. It's as if some malevolent life remained within it, as if there were ghosts baked into the brick.

Hatfield turned to them. "Remember, you are to keep silent until I call upon you. I still strike the actual bargain. You, Kirk, shall seal it as Starfleet's authorized representative of the Federation. I have been informed of my bargaining limits. They are very liberal."

Liberal? Kirk thought. Is that what you call it? I call it nothing short of

treacherous. He thought back to the tape and slammed one fist into his palm.

For an instant, light bathed the city, then dissolved in a shower of fairy-dust. The wrought-metal gates at the top of the stairs swung open.

"His usual grand entrance," Hatfield said.

A comic-opera emperor, complete with robes and crown, appeared, followed by a half-dozen figures in black and one in green. "Hatfield," the Emperor of Limbo called, "I welcome you and your companions. Approach."

Hatfield began the climb. Kirk motioned Spock and McCoy to stay back. "Not until we know who those goons with him are," he said.

"Your partners hesitate. A poor way to begin negotiations," Kobec called to Hatfield. She turned. "Come up," she called down.

"Who are they?" Kirk said.

"Only my myrmidons. The last of the original inhabitants of this world. They serve me now. You need not fear them. They have no will of their own, and can do nothing to harm you unless I order them. I do not so order them--for the moment."

"I still don't like those apes," McCoy said.

"We have to trust him. We can't go back now," Kirk said. There wasn't any way he was going to let Hatfield look braver than he. With as much dignity as they could muster, the three climbed the stairs until they stood behind Hatfield, face to face with Kobec.

Kirk realized with a jolt how little separated this small-time Napoleon from himself. The face beneath the crown, except for the darkness of complexion and the profusion of eyebrow, could have been his own. It had the same air of command and confidence he had spent much effort to cultivate. Funny, how a race so close to us in appearance could be so opposite in character, he thought, but then, Humans had gone through their savage periods, and heaven help us, we go through them still.

"Welcome, travelers," he said in an expansive voice. "I am Kobec, lord of this place."

"A Klingon," McCoy said involuntarily. Being a Klingon's guest was the last way he'd choose to spend a shore leave.

"A Klingon by the blood and bones of my fathers, but now my own master by my own will. I owe no allegiance to the Empire. My debt of loyalty to Kahless was repaid very poorly indeed." Kobec gestured. "I am fatigued by all this standing."

The figure in green lunged to hands and knees. Kobec seated himself on its back.

Kirk nudged Spock. "What kind of lizard is that? I've never seen anything like him before."

"I shall endeavor to find out before we depart," Spock whispered.

"Can it talk?" McCoy wondered, a bit too loudly. Kobec heard him and laughed.

"This is Thorok, my personal servant. An exile like myself. Yes, he can speak, quite eloquently in fact, when I permit it." Kobec shifted his posterior. "Now that I am comfortable, we could talk all day."

"You shall remain one afternoon, and share our food once, in accordance with the customs of this place, as I have ordained. We have all been turned away ourselves; thus, we turn no one away," Kobec said. "At the end of that time, you shall meet me again on these steps, and make your petitions. After I have ruled on them, you are no longer guests. You may remain as citizens, if you so request and I favor that request, or you may go on your way unmolested. If you do not join us and do not go, you and your fellow-travelers will be treated as enemies. I shall blast you from the sky and dance on your broken bones."

Knowing Kobec probably couldn't do it didn't make Kirk feel any more at ease.

"Good old down-home hospitality," McCoy murmured.

"We accept these terms in the name of the United Federation of Planets," Hatfield said.

"Excellent. Commander Hatfield, I hope we can do business as good as on your last sojourn. My city is your home until dinner." Kobec rose and clapped his hands, and the lizard-humanoid sprang up. "Commander, you have seen the city; you need no guide. The rest of you will each be assigned a guide from among the

citizens here. Enjoy your visit, as I know I shall enjoy it.

♦♦♦

"Well, Harry, you old scalawag," Kirk said. "You outwitted us in the end, didn't you? I suppose it's a pleasant enough life here, maybe a bit dull for a space-dog like you."

Mudd sat on a crumbling wall. "It beats a rehab colony."

"Not by much, I take it."

"The things I have to go through to stay here, Kirk! The endless court audiences, the ceremony, the bending of knee and kissing of--" he spluttered. "The man's a downright megalomaniac. And so little ever happens here! You know me, Kirk; I'm a man of adventure, of challenge. That's why I always liked you. 'To boldly go where no man has gone before,' eh? That's the life."

"I suspect you boldly went just a little too far," Kirk said amiable, settling himself on the wall beside Mudd. "Or else you wouldn't be here."

"It is marginally better to be on Limbo than to deal with the Scathian constabulary."

"Now, Harry, seriously. You didn't try to pull a fast one on the Scathians, did you?" Mudd nodded. "Really, I gave you credit for more sense of self-preservation than that."

"They want land-cruisers, I gave them land-cruisers," he said. "They should have told me beforehand they wanted engines in them."

"I hope you didn't try any of your fancy-dances on Kobec," Kirk said.

"There's not a fancy-dance left in me," Mudd assured him. "Not a fandango, not even a foxtrot."

"Well, the weather's nice here, anyway," Kirk said.

"Always. I keep hoping for a hailstorm, but no such luck. Even a little cold snap."

"You don't like it?"

"Boring as hell!" Mudd snapped. "Even those blasted androids would have been better."

"Hellish, Harry? Well, what would you expect in Pandemonium?" Kirk laughed.

Mudd did not laugh. "Listen, Kirk. More hellish than you know. I was among the first to arrive here. I was here when Kobec came. I have seen things..."

Kirk stopped laughing. "Things? What things?"

A clarion sounded. "That's your summons for dinner. I have to take you back now," Mudd said.

Kirk grabbed Mudd's shoulders and shook them. "Tell me, Harry! What 'things'? WHAT 'THINGS'!"

"I'm sorry, Captain. As you said, I have a very strong sense of self-preservation." Mudd shook himself free of Kirk's desperate grasp. He started down the path back to the center of the city. "But I have no grudge against you or your officers. I even like you. So I'll tell you this, and listen well: GET OFF LIMBO. As fast as you can. All of you. Put your ship into warp drive, as fast as it will go, and go as far as you can, and don't look back, and don't come back."

♦♦♦

Thorok led Spock through the maze of shrubbery. The Vulcan swung his tricorder in wide arcs. "Am I standing too close to your machine, Mr. Spock?" Thorok asked. "I would not want to interfere with your readings."

"My readings are fine," Spock said. And strange indeed, he added to himself.

Thorok stopped by a tall, gnarled tree. "Don't come too close to this one," he said. "The bark is highly acid. It puts down roots by eating through stone. The fruit is excellent, though one must gather it carefully."

"Most interesting," Spock said, and pointed the tricorder in the direction of Thorok and the tree. "You seem to be quite knowledgeable on the subject."

"Yes, indeed. Did you know this tree may be distantly related to Terran poison ivy?" Thorok pointed to yet another plant, and ran to its side. He patted it affectionately. "Don't you try this yourself, Mr. Spock. This is a plant-animal combination of some sort--what, I am not sure, since I left most of my lab

equipment behind when I was forced to come here. But it possesses low-level intelligence of a sort, and it will attack you. The blossoms emit an aroma which is paralytic to the nervous system within seconds. It knows me and I have made a pet of it." He spoke soothingly to the plant. "There, I wouldn't let a stranger harm you."

Thorok touched another flower with almost worshipful fingers. "All efforts to breed the toxins out of sasteni-flowers have failed," he said. "Yet, on this world, not only has it happened naturally, the flowers are nourishing. Bring a few of these seeds back with you, and you could end famine forever. Bread for the galaxy."

"You are very learned for a servant," Spock said.

Thorok turned on him. "Do you think I was always as you see me?" The veins on his horny forehead bulged. "I was a xenobiologist, a botanist, a geneticist. One of the most respected in my homeland."

"Back home," Spock said, "in the Klingon Empire." Thorok drew back. "Appearances may be misleading, but the tricorder readings do not lie. You are as much a Klingon as Kobec."

"And as much an outcast," Thorok admitted. "We can never go home."

"Why are you outcasts?"

"Look at me. Because I am as I am, a monster," Thorok said. "And Kobec, because he made me as I am."

What are you, though?" Spock persisted.

"A great experiment gone awry. We sought to strengthen the race, to breed the superior Klingon warrior. Stronger, more intelligent, in every warlike art superior. We isolated the best of several species, and sought to introduce it into the Klingon genetic makeup. Human, Romulan, Horta; the strengths of each, but still, Klingon dominant," he said. "It was a noble effort. And it did not entirely fail. But we paid too high a price for our success."

"I was the first experimental volunteer subject," Thorok continued. He had clearly been longing to tell his tale to somebody, anybody. "It took a month before the effect of the bone and muscle grafts spread through my entire body and became visible. In that month, I waxed stronger. All marveled. The Emperor was pleased. He commanded the treatment be administered to all his subjects, throughout the empire."

"I see," Spock said. Now he knew why nobody had seen a Klingon since Kobec went into exile.

"There is no antidote," Thorok said. His words came rapidly, and with the intensity of the fanatic. "But we succeeded! I am stronger, more intelligent, harder than such as Kobec. I, not he, should rule here." He tapped his forehead. "My brain has grown to 75 percent greater capacity. To protect this great brain, my skull has grown the horny carapace; to service it with blood, the veins in my temples have enlarged by an equivalent capacity; to carry the increased load on the brain and central nervous system--" he tapped the ridge running down the center of his hairless head-- "the spinal cord has grown. Not the appearance we have been accustomed to, perhaps. But this is the price of progress."

"And all the Klingons have taken these treatments of yours and Kobec's?"

"To the best of my knowledge. When the Emperor orders a thing done, it takes considerably less than a month to get it done. They all look like me, except for Kobec. Bitterness crept into his boast. "Better. But uglier. Ugly as poverty, ugly as slavery, uglier even than an Earther."

"In five years, Thorok, I predict you will be able to go home, if not sooner. If all Klingons look like you, you will not be a monster, as you call it. And if, indeed, you have succeeded in creating a better Klingon genotype, you may well receive a hero's welcome."

"Kahless is not called the Unmerciful for naught," Thorok said. "He may well learn to live with the mutation we have unleashed. But he is not forgiving. I shall never see my wife Ke'kyn again, nor our children. And, if I did, I would probably not recognize them beneath their deformity." Thorok threw his head back

and wailed, the desolate, ululating cry of a wounded predator. And like all wounded animals, he is dangerous, Spock thought.

"Do not tell Kobec I spoke of this," Thorok said. "He provides my food and shelter. Even the life of an exile and a slave is preferable to no life at all; and I shall pay him back in my own time."

"One more question," Spock said. "Those that he calls 'myrmidons.' What are they?"

"He continues his experiments. They have had part of their brain destroyed. They can do only as he wills. I at least retain my mind."

Spock thought of Paolo Delgado. He indicated another plant, further down the path. "And what is this?"

Thorok shook off his rage. "Very resilient fibrous stem, useful in weaving," he began. The clarion sounded.

"This," the Romulan woman said, "is our infirmary. I thought you would be most interested in it."

McCoy looked closely at her. Maybe it was only the resemblance to Spock that put him off, Romulans and Vulcans having sprung centuries past from the same stock. But there was something else about her. Sooner or later, he'd put his finger on it.

"It also serves as the Emperor-in-exile's laboratory," she said.

McCoy poked among the exotic instruments and potions set out on the lab tables. If this was a laboratory, it was more than a century behind the times. And the old-fashioned dissecting table induced a first-class case of goosebumps. "What kind of things does he do here?" he asked, lifting a beaker.

"Experiments," she said, in a voice which told him he'd rather not know.

McCoy put the beaker down hastily. "I don't see how he can work in here. The light's all wrong; those stained-glass windows throw everything off."

"Ah, but the room has compensations," she said. She steered him toward the far corner from the door. "Here, for example."

"There's nothing here."

She darted away and pressed a hidden button, and a shimmer surrounded McCoy, then dissipated.

"Come here," she said. "I want to show you something."

He walked toward her, and straight into the force-field, nose first.

"This was once a court of justice," she said. "The force-field now confining you is used as a specimen cage. Once, it contained prisoners waiting to hear their judgment and death sentence. Very appropriate, is it not?"

"I'm impressed," he said. He waited. She made no move to release him. He tapped on the unseen wall. "All right, fun's over. Turn it off."

She sat on a table, picked up one of the antiquated scalpels and ran the tip of the blade down one finger. "Suppose I did not. How long, do you think, would it take your Mr. Spock to come looking for you?"

"Let me out."

"An hour? Two? We in Limbo have time to wait."

McCoy pounded on the barrier.

"What do you suppose I would do when he arrives, Doctor?" she said. "We have some scores to settle, he and I."

He looked at her. Sickeningly, he recalled where he had seen her before. Another risky top-secret mission...a stolen cloaking device...a prisoner aboard the Enterprise.

"They exiled me for losing that engagement," she said. "The Praetor has no patience with failure. Never mind that it was treachery that brought me down. The treachery of your seductive Mr. Spock with his soft touch and softer lies. Of your Captain Kirk, in his sham Romulan garb and Romulan ears. And you, McCoy, with your clever scalpel," she spat. "Did you suppose you could rob me of my ship, my people, almost my life, and never be called to stand in the court of judgment?"

McCoy stopped banging. He was calm.

"Let me out, or else," he said.

"Or else what?"

"I am a guest of your ruler," McCoy said evenly, "and I don't believe you're acting on his orders."

Her hand stole unseen to the controls. "Human," she said, "this is not yet over." The barrier shimmered again and dissolved.

Far off, the clarion sounded.

♦♦♦

Kobec dipped a finger into the sauce as a myrmidon carried the bowl to the table. "Careful, idiot, you'll drop it," he said, and licked his finger. Indifferently spiced at best. The myrmidon had been an excellent cook before his conversion; no doubt further experimentation would develop a way to suppress the will without damaging so much of the higher intelligence.

If he bargained shrewdly, he would soon have a perfect subject on which to test such questions; perhaps more than one. He could afford to be creative, and perhaps lose a few.

He stared at a hand laid on his shoulder, and drew his ceremonial dagger as he turned.

"I ask pardon of your Lordship," said the Romulan woman. "This--" she turned aside the point of the dagger with a flick of her finger--"will not be necessary."

Kobec resheathed the dagger. "I had a royal audience this morning, when the visitors arrived. Why could you not have spoken then?"

"This requires privacy. It concerns the visitors."

"Very well, speak here. Even if these lumps of flesh understood, they could not speak."

"I ask a boon," she said. "There is one among these visitors who must not leave."

"Do not use the word 'must' to me," Kobec said. "I assume you are referring to Spock." She flushed. He smiled. "Come, not hard to guess. You desire him? You are lonely, perhaps? There are no other women here; you need not be lonely long." He slipped an arm around her. "You could be a consort."

She slipped back to arm's length. "The only fire that burns me now is revenge. We have scores to settle, he and I. Give him to me."

"That I cannot do. But your disgrace shall be avenged, if not by your own hand. If it will appease you, one of the others? The captain, perhaps?"

"I shall see him suffer as well. But my prime concern is Spock."

"The doctor is of no importance to me," Kobec continued, "and I have no objections to your amusing yourself with him."

"The Vulcan," she repeated.

"The guests are already at table. We must not keep them waiting."

♦♦♦

The one good thing about the dinner of state was that it was over quickly. Nobody spoke. Spock poked at his cutlet, trying to make it look as if he'd tasted it. Apparently nobody had told Kobec that, physical similarities and distant ancestors notwithstanding, one Romulan's meat was a vegetarian Vulcan's poison. Kirk and McCoy ate without relish and wondered what was on their plates. Hatfield took the meal, as she seemed to take almost everything, in stride.

A procession of myrmidons escorted them to the city gates. Kobec turned to Spock. "Mr. Spock, if you would be so kind as to serve as scribe?" Spock nodded curtly. "Your recording device, then," Kobec said.

Spock proffered the tricorder for inspection. "In the old times, we would have written this pact in molten metal on stone, and sealed it with blood," Kobec said. "We are more sophisticated now, I think. A computer record will do."

"What about a signature?" Hatfield asked.

"Simple," Spock said. "Press your hand to the grid. You will enter a handprint and complete biological data. If all parties will accept that as legal, I believe we may proceed."

"Done," said Kirk.

"Let us proceed to business," Hatfield said.

Kobec's face fell in feigned disappointment. "This is the stumbling block,"

he said. "There can be no bargain."

"We suffered through this trip for that?" McCoy said.

"Quiet," said Hatfield.

"You see, I have so much, and you so little to offer in return," Kobec continued. He threw his arms in a wide arc. "What have I here on my little world? I had prepared a small sampling."

Kobec clapped his hands again, Thorok lurched forward, laboring under the weight of a large chest. The monarch threw open the lid.

"You, Spock. You Vulcans persist in the belief that everything which exists, all of which has objective reality, must fit into some logical pattern. But this planet, populated as it is by freaks and misfits, is itself a freak and a misfit. You have seen my botanical gardens. Tell me, do the flora there fit into the known parameters of science?"

"No," Spock admitted. "But this does not mean they cannot be made to fit, or that the parameters cannot be redefined."

"'Redefine the parameters,' eh," Kobec said. "Do you realize that you have just suggested a complete remaking of the universe and its laws as they are now understood by your brilliant Vulcan scientists?"

"I do," he said. "I admit it would be daring to suggest it. But if it is necessary—."

"If it is necessary, Mr. Spock, science would be catapulted centuries ahead, as far ahead of your present knowledge as the starship is ahead of the beast-drawn wagon. If we can reach an agreement, you could be partly responsible for an act which would rank with the discovery of fire, or the wheel, or the Terran Copernicus's theory."

Kirk glanced at Spock, who was listening intently.

"I have heard it said that your kind only lusts once in many years. For a woman, perhaps; one woman is like another, and they are easily put aside." The Romulan ex-commander flushed. "But science, ah, science! Every new scrap of knowledge is unique, and to the discoverer, his alone. That is what you Vulcans lust for: knowledge."

"Spock," Kirk hissed, "Remember the original ruler of Pandemonium was Satan, the father of lies."

Kobec turned to McCoy. "Did you know, Doctor, why our world is pleasant and green year-round? There is an unusual sort of fungal ground-cover at both poles. It seems to absorb and convert solar energy, a variant of photosynthesis. It has other wonderful properties as well." The emperor drew a lump of mossy soil from his casket. "It seems to have a rejuvenating and healing effect."

"The fountain of youth?" McCoy said.

"More. It stimulates the production of your white blood cells, it speeds up the production of antibodies. Would you care to inspect it?"

McCoy stepped forward. Kobec seized his wrist, drew his dagger and inflicted a jagged cut through the sleeve the length of the forearm.

Kirk yelled.

McCoy yelled louder.

"Relax," Hatfield said.

Kobec slapped the moss over the wound, "How does it feel?"

"Kind of warm. Glowing," McCoy said.

Kobec lifted the moss. The forearm was unmarred. "Alas, it will not mend your shirt. What would you, as a healer, give for this miracle?"

Kirk suspected he'd just seen the price of a man's soul quoted.

Kobec turned to Hatfield. "I do not have to tell you the deeds of which I am capable."

"No," she said. "I have seen them. I see them still."

"Then let me say only that the same hand which cripples may heal; that which has been done may be undone. For a price, of course."

Hatfield thought of Paco, lumbering through half-life without a self, and uncrossed her arms.

"Kirk," Kobec said. "You must seal the bargain, if there is to be one."

"I've seen some nice parlor tricks, Your Lordship, and heard some very expansive talk. I suppose you have shown all your goods."

"Not quite," Kobec said. "You have not met my Vice-Regent. A man skilled at discipline, who keeps the more unruly of our little band under my...authority."

"Step forth," he said. A tall, severe creature, half-humanoid, half tiger, faced Kirk.

"Har Kal!" Kirk said.

"You thought me dead," the tiger-man said. "You were not so fortunate. Perhaps some day, I shall think the same of you and your Federation, and be more fortunate than you."

Kobec threw back his head and laughed, the harsh cry reverberating among the dead turrets. "A fit Vice-Regent, Kirk! A man who shows not a trace of fear or hesitation."

"Twelve planets wiped out, Har Kal," Kirk said, without emotion. "Twelve fertile, inhabited colony planets. Fifteen million living beings blown up for your crazy experiment."

"Correction, Kirk," Har Kal said. "Only the first was an experiment, to see if I could induce a chain reaction in a planet's core. The other eleven were because I liked the pretty fireballs."

"A fugitive, like myself," Kobec said. "What would you give to bring him back in chains? What would you pay--to make him pay?"

Har Kal turned on Kobec, teeth bared. "You promised me sanctuary."

"As long as you live in Pandemonium, friend Har Kal. I shall not force you to leave the planet. But, if at some point I choose to exile you from the city, and the Federation has access to the surface of this world, you shall, of course, have to make your own bargain with them."

Har Kal tensed to spring. Myrmidons surged forward, and he retreated.

Get a grip on yourself, Kirk thought. If you agree to barter souls, you're no better than he is.

But his duty to Starfleet--and to the Enterprise, which the Council had threatened to snatch forever from his clasp--and those orders, those mad orders from a Council which seemed to have forgotten the meaning of a single life in quest of the greater good....

"What do you want of us?" Kirk said.

"Very simple. Almost a triviality," Kobec said. "I offer you access to all this planet and exclusive right to exploit or study anything you find here--with the exception of Pandemonium, of course, which shall remain shielded, and its inhabitants given full immunity from attack or any of your laws."

"What do you want?" McCoy asked.

"You will be permitted to establish any kind of colony, outpost, station or base which does not interfere with the city."

"What do you want?" Hatfield persisted.

"And Har Kal shall be exiled from our city into your territory, for you to ignore or deal with as you see fit."

"What do you want?" Spock said.

"You, Mr. Spock," Kobec replied.

Kirk stepped forward, but Hatfield placed a restraining hand on his chest. "What do you mean, you 'want' Spock?"

"Once he is turned over to me, that is no longer the Federation's business."

"But what happens to him, not that anything will happen?" McCoy said.

"I am a master of genetic science. Spock is a masterpiece of genetic engineering such as I could not otherwise hope to acquire. The only living Vulcan-Human hybrid in existence! A misfit, a freak--perfectly appropriate here in Pandemonium."

McCoy regretted every jibe he'd ever made about Spock's pointed ears.

"So he lives with you? As what? One of those brainless behemoths you have shambling around here? Lobotomy?" McCoy said.

"Oh, no, that would be a waste. Think of the experiments. What I could learn from his dissection."

"You are not going to slice up Spock!"

"Easy, Bones," Kirk said. "Nobody's signed any deal." He looked at his first officer, who seemed no more moved by the discussion of his life and death than by a chess game between two beginners.

"Hardy specimen that he is, I expect he will provide me with amusement and information for a long time to come," Kobec concluded.

The three turned to Hatfield. She looked straight ahead, but as if something other than Kobec were before her.

Kobec rose, stretched and yawned. "You have my terms. They are not negotiable. Unless I choose to ask for something more, such as another one of you. But this is my minimum, and I suggest you accept before I become greedy."

McCoy glared at Kobec. The Emperor smiled benignly on him. "Yes, having a Human would make for some very instructive anatomical comparisons....You have three minutes while I take refreshment in the grand hall; then I shall return for your answer." He turned and retreated past the gates.

"He's mad, Jim. You can't do it."

Kirk sank down on the steps. "That's just the problem, Bones. I can. I'm under orders to do it."

"Nobody would give you orders like that."

"Bones, Bones, do you have any idea how badly the Federation wants this damn ball of rock? Why do you think I couldn't tell you about the classified orders?"

"The Federation wouldn't do something like that," McCoy insisted.

"The greatest good for the greatest number. The ends justify the means," Kirk said. "The Council's words, not mine."

"That sounds like Kobec himself. You can cure your diseases, feed your starving, mete out justice, heal your crippled, remake your universe itself. All you have to pay is a life."

"If I had it here, I'd let you look at the tape yourself! Not only can I sign away Spock's life, if he asks, I can give him yours too, and Scotty's, and Uhura's, and on and on, as long as I bring the ship back in one piece. Ships are expensive," he said, "lives are cheap."

"Captain," Hatfield said, "I am the bargainer, but you have the right of veto. I must have instructions."

McCoy fixed his gaze on her. "You'd even consider this? I'm surprised at you."

"I cannot judge fairly in my position," she said, her voice breaking. "Kobec took a life from me. He made Paco into little better than his myrmidons. He offers to restore that life, which I love. I have no grudge against you, Spock, but you are a stranger to me. How can you blame me if I would vote to save my lover by sacrificing a stranger?"

"Lady," McCoy said. "I sure hope you're never a stranger to anyone."

Spock stepped forward. "Captain, in all this concern for my welfare, nobody has consulted me. I can solve the problem very easily. I shall go."

Kirk turned eloquent eyes on Spock. "You have already said you have your orders, Captain. I have never refused yet to obey a command which I knew to be reasonable."

"Reasonable!" McCoy said.

"I joined the fleet under the assumption that I might someday be asked to give up my life: through accident, in battle, to disease. To die in this way might at least advance the cause of knowledge and progress, perhaps inestimably, certainly more so than my most devoted efforts for the rest of my life. This would be a fitting death for a Vulcan," he said.

"And what if I refuse to give the order for you to go?"

"Then, Captain, I officially relieve you of command of the Enterprise, for refusing to obey a clear and direct order from your own superiors," he said.

Kobec returned, myrmidons at his heels. He looked from face to face. He did

not have to ask.

Hatfield held out the tricorder to Kobec, mutely pleading with him to take it before it burned her hand. He pressed his palm to the grid. "My signature. And now, Captain, you may place your--what is that expression you Earthers use?--your 'John Hanson?'--on it."

No matter what Kirk did, he knew, he was no longer in command. Were he not to affirm, Spock would quite legally remove him and sign in his place. Where he to affirm, he would keep command of the Enterprise, both on Limbo and in the eyes of the Council, pleased with their docile pet of a captain. But he would no longer be in command of himself, pushed by forces beyond his control; or of his crew, whose lives he had sworn to protect.

Kirk stood for a moment on the edge of nothingness, looking into himself, seeing only the maw of the abyss. Then he pressed his palm to the plate.

Hatfield popped the two tapes out of the tricorder and handed one to Kobec, who tucked it into his robe. "Ah, we have done good business today."

"You've won this round, Kobec," Kirk said. "But you'd better keep yourself shut up tight inside those force-fields. If you so much as poke your snout outside this city--"

"I shall be utterly protected by the terms of the contract," Kobec said. "Put him in the specimen cage."

Myrmidons surged around Spock. He was lost to sight in a mass of black-clad flesh, which moved off, pulsing and heaving, like a huge jellyfish.

"And Paco?" she said.

"Your paramour may return with the first expedition. I set no time limits upon fulfilling my side of the bargain," Kobec said. "Do not disturb me now. I expect to be busy with my new specimen for some weeks."

Waves of unspoken hatred spilled forth from the woman, nearly knocking down Kirk and McCoy. "I would have thought you would be the last person to be reminded never to be too anxious to close a deal," Kobec said. "Your sojourn is over; you may go. Go to the city limits, and the barrier shall be lowered. Go into the woods outside the city, and return to your vessel. You have twenty of your minutes to return; after that, the planetary field will be in place." Kobec turned, framed beneath the spikes of the gate. "There is no more to be said. GO."

Kobec and his entourage retreated. "You heard the man," Kirk said. "Let's go."

"Just like that?"

Kirk nodded.

"I thought I knew you better than that, Jim."

"Don't burn your psychology degree just yet, Bones. Come on."

♦♦♦

The clearing was small, but enough open space surrounded the three to enable Scott and Rand to get a clear fix on them.

"There was an Earthman once, a writer name of Forster," McCoy said. "He once wrote that if he had the choice of betraying his country or betraying his friend, he hoped he'd have the courage to betray his country."

Hatfield stepped between them. "The captain did what he had to do," she said. "It was I who failed."

She laid on awkward hand on McCoy's shoulder. He jerked away. "Perhaps now that you've had a taste of failure, you can be a bit more tolerant of the failures of others," he said.

Kirk opened his communicator. "Kirk to Enterprise."

"Enterprise here, sir," Scott's voice responded. "We've been a wee bit worried."

"Two to beam up on my signal."

"It looks like we had reason for worry," Scott said.

Kirk handed the communicator to McCoy. "Take good care of my ship, Bones. I'm going after him."

"What? That's suicide."

"No, it's not," he said. "It's getting my life back. It's getting my command

back. I can't take the lives of four hundred crewmen in my hands if I can't offer them my own integrity." He smiled. "I hope I have the courage to betray my country. But I'm not betraying the Enterprise. If I can come back with Spock, I will."

McCoy looked at him and handed the communicator to Hatfield. "You sure don't have any chance of getting him out alone. Two heads are better than one."

Hatfield looked at the communicator and turned it over in her hands. "I also feel a need to stay, Captain. I—I have a personal stake in this."

Kirk looked at the two pairs of ocean-blue eyes. Pity they couldn't get along; in some ways, they were so alike. "Belay that order, Scotty."

"Captain, the shield will close again around ye! Ye'll be stuck."

"Trust us. We'll be in touch. Kirk out," he said, and snapped the communicator shut again. Above them, at the same moment, the field closed an angry fist around Limbo.

♦♦♦

Night had fallen. Night was when the myrmidons went on their food-gathering expeditions for the resident-inmates of Pandemonium, Mudd had said. The shield around the city would be down. They must eat quickly and move on, lest the hordes discover them.

Kirk slit open one of the ration packets Scott had beamed down to them. It was empty. The force-field had efficiently disintegrated the organic contents, leaving the metal-foil package intact. It had also stripped the cotton-and-wool covering from the blankets they had requested, and the synthetic stuffing lay in a sad heap.

"No peach cobbler tonight," McCoy said, throwing the limp packet over his shoulder. "Well, I needed to drop a couple of pounds anyway."

Kirk gave Hatfield the tricorder. "Something must be edible around here. Find it. Don't wander too far, and be quiet."

"Perhaps you should give her that phaser, Jim."

"I can do without it," she replied. "I shall not be gone too long or too far."

Kirk broke open a flare, and the two men huddled around the faint glow.

"Suppose we do get him out?" McCoy asked. "What do we do? We still have that field to contend with. We're hermetically sealed."

"Scotty's working on it now," Kirk said. "What intelligence can make, intelligence can unmake. The computers will figure it out."

"Let's hope so. Thank god he can't pick up subspace radio. If he could tap in on our communicator, we might as well surrender now."

"I surrendered to him once," Kirk said. "He doesn't get that satisfaction twice."

"If the ship doesn't leave orbit soon, he'll smell a rat," McCoy said. "Maybe he can't fire at it, but I can't believe he doesn't know it's up there."

"We can't be sure, so we have to assume he does. But if he had sensors to cover the planet's surface, he would have found us by now."

"How much time does all this guessing add up to?"

"Very little. There's one factor we haven't considered yet. And that is, how much time does Spock have before Kobec gets his knives into him?"

"Let's move. Tonight. Now, if not sooner."

Hatfield returned, tricorder over her shoulder, her arms full of blue-purple globes. "Tricorder says these are safe to eat," she said, and dumped them in Kirk's lap.

Kirk took a bite. He spat it out.

"They have all the protein of soybeans, and a healthy percentage of most of the necessary vitamins. More C than a cantaloupe."

"And less flavor than cardboard," McCoy said, and threw his away also. "Remind Spock to program that gadget for flavor analysis."

In the uncomfortable sudden silence, each thought of Spock possibly already reduced to carefully labeled parts.

"You've done very well, Commander," Kirk said. "But would you object to going out again? This time, please look for something which is not only edible but

palatable."

"If this planet is so remarkable, it could at least come up with a peach-cobbler tree," McCoy said.

"She certainly found that fast," Kirk said, looking at her retreating figure. The trailing skirt torn off, the gewgaws and medals mostly lost in the brambles, Hatfield had begun to look almost human to Kirk.

"She's got a nose for it," McCoy said. "She just seems to 'know' things."

"Something about her spooks me, Bones. And I know she spooks you."

McCoy thought for a moment. No, get out of this mess first. He could explain later, if there was a later.

"Our first problem is finding Spock. He could be anywhere in there."

"He could be, but he probably isn't," McCoy answered. "He's in the lab, in the specimen cage. As he would point out, it's only logical."

Their voices dropping to whispers, their faces wraithlike in the stillness of Limbo's moonless summer night, the two made hurried plans of justice and revenge.

♦♦♦

Hatfield tugged with all her muscle, and the cluster of melons came loose. Not quite ripe, but they would do. She pointed the tricorder at it, then nibbled at one. Not bad. In fact, not unlike peach cobbler. Selecting the three ripest ones, she hurried back to the campsite.

Kirk sat alone.

"I have the doctor's peach-cobbler tree," she said. "Where is he?"

"He was the only logical choice," Kirk said. "I have the background in engineering. I'm staying in touch with Scotty, feeding him data."

She dumped the fruit. "Where is he?"

"He knows where the specimen cage is. I don't," Kirk said. "Give me that tricorder; I'll need it."

She began to hand it to him, then snatched it back. "Where is he?"

Kirk exploded. "Isn't it obvious? And why should you care?"

Later, briefly, fitfully, Kirk slept. Hatfield did not.

♦♦♦

Sleep was one of the few grudging mercies Kobec allowed Spock. His Human side was dreaming.

Soft tapping sounds. His drowsy consciousness translated them into the claws of his pet sehlat tapping on the stone floors of his father's ancestral home in ShiKahr.

The tapping stopped. The sehlat has padded out of the solarium, and may even now be at the foot of my bed, Spock dreamed. There is something warm and alive at the foot of my bed. And when the dawn breaks, I shall run barefoot, free, across the sands under my world's ceaseless sun, a child again.

Tap, tap, tap. The sehlat? No, merely the slow and simple computer which had been among his first toys. He fought off wakefulness.

A low whine cleaved the air, growing more insistent. It held no parallel in the world of his youth; yet he knew it.

He jolted awake. A phaser set to overload.

Spock rolled away from the sound at once. In the shadows he saw another form crouch behind the dissecting table. Not a sehlat, he thought.

The whine stopped. All was white light and cataclysm for an instant. In the dimness, the shadow approached the barrier. Tap, tap...bleakly seamless.

The dim figure groped along the wall, found a control panel and punched buttons at random. The room filled with light again, this time more stable.

"Spock?" McCoy said. "Are you all right?"

Spock attained his feet. The phaser blast had left a large dark haze on the barrier, but it stood otherwise unbreached. "You should not have come."

"I couldn't very well leave you here. Let's go. Jim is waiting for us."

"We cannot break the barrier. You may have triggered alarms. Perhaps Kobec is already on his way." Spock threw himself against the shield. "I urge you to go."

McCoy began bashing his fists against the barrier. "Damn you, come down!"

"If a phaser will not move it, profanity will not persuade it. I am a commander. You are only a lieutenant commander. I order you to go." He threw all his weight behind his shoulder, caroming against off the field.

McCoy slapped the field with the flat of his hands. "And as ship's medical officer, I certify you unfit for command. I'm taking you back to Sickbay. I hope Jim and Scotty are having better luck than I am. This thing's tough as--"

A very un-Vulcan desperation entered Spock's voice as alarms began to whoop. "You will die to no purpose! Go!"

McCoy struck the dark smudge. Spock lashed out at the damaged spot.

Their palms met.

"Spock! Did you--?"

The intensity of discovery lit Spock's face. "Of course! Doctor, do as I say. Now. Run toward the barrier when I say go. No time to explain. Just do it."

Footsteps pounded in the hall, muffled and distant, growing closer.

"Aim for the darkened area," Spock barked.

The two ran toward each other, into the smudge hanging in mid-air. A glittering flash surrounded them as the barrier dissolved for an instant. Spock maneuvered quickly past McCoy, extending his arm to catch the doctor and pull him back as they passed.

McCoy, carried by momentum and panic, ducked under Spock's arm and rolled across the floor, landing hard on his knee, the wind knocked out of him.

Spock crouched, alert, free.

McCoy struggled to hands and knees, dazed, caged.

The footsteps pounded closer.

"We must try again, Doctor."

"I can't. I can't get up. I think it's broken." He squeezed his knee and grimaced.

A door creaked, then crashed, and Spock knew they were in the long corridor, massing, awaiting the arrival of their brain--Kobec, or perhaps Har Kal...or the Romulan....

"Go, or they'll kill us both!" McCoy said.

"How can I leave you there, when you would not leave me?" Spock said.

"Because I'm illogical and you're not, that's how!" McCoy howled.

Spock raised his hand, fingers parted two and two. "Sohl krai karas thy'llu poli kai."

The bolt on the door scraped. Ancient hinges creaked to life.

"Stop mumbling and MOVE, Vulcan!"

Spock vaulted the dissecting table and took a leap at the stained-glass window. Bits of glass flew around him. Leaded integuments twisted to let his body pass halfway. He landed on the sill on his stomach, and groaned. His hands found a hold in the crevices of the wall, and slowly, glass and metal gnawing at his stomach, he pulled himself through. A dark green stain and bits of blue tunic marked his passage. "Pain is in the mind," he moaned, and dropped from sight.

Another series of purposeful poundings in the hall; one pair of boots, McCoy thought. Now Fearless Leader's here, just in time to be too late.

Kobec threw open the door, myrmidons flanking him.

"In this day of trades, it appears you have made an exchange of your own," Kobec said. "Very resourceful as far as it goes, though clearly not far enough."

Thorok and the Romulan made their way through the myrmidon mass and to Kobec's side. "You like it so much, you had to return," she said. "Shall I slay him now, My Lord?" Thorok asked, with no more concern than if he had offered to peel the regent a piece of fruit.

"I think not. The planet is still shielded. The bargaining may not yet be over."

•••

Kirk sat in the encampment, head cradled in one hand, communicator in the other.

"We've run it through a hundred times, Captain," Scott's tinny voice said.

"The computer canna even guess what matter of beastie it is, much less how to get through it."

"Then we're stuck here," Kirk said. "Even if McCoy makes it back, there's no place we can go."

"With your permissions, I'll run it through again."

"Listen, Scotty. Give me a few more hours, just until planet dawn over Pandemonium. If you haven't heard from us, take her out of orbit. Don't wait for us."

"We canna let you die."

"If you haven't heard by then, we'll be dead already. You can wait an extra few minutes, but don't hang around too long."

Scott's silence was eloquent.

"No, we don't want to die here. We want even less to live here. But at this point we're playing a game, and we don't even know the rules. We aren't making long-term plans, other than to try to keep on living."

Kirk had forgotten the mission. He had forgotten the Council, the Admiral's rebuke, the reason he came to this painted whore of a world in the first place, which promised a man wonders and took his bones and blood and soul in return. He had even forgotten the no-longer-splendid, no-longer arrogant woman who crouched by the fire with moist eyes. All he remembered was that he must live, and, if it were in his power, his friends must live, and his ship must live.

"Buzz me if you find anything. Kirk out."

He gnawed on a fruit.

The bushes rustled, and he reached for his phaser, then recalled they had only one among them, and he'd give it to McCoy. Yet another reason to hate the woman, who had insisted they walk unarmed into the snakepit.

Dirty, bruised, belly slashed into confetti, but alive, Spock fought his way out of the underbrush and squatted at Kirk's feet.

"Spock, you made it!"

"Obviously, Captain."

"What did they do to you?"

"Nothing," Spock said. "I did this to myself." He examined his wounds, carefully picking out bits of bright glass, wincing. "Superficial. I would have preferred a less drastic exit, but time was short."

"McCoy?"

"In Kobec's hands. He freed me by taking my place in the cage."

Hatfield glared at Kirk, anger uncoiling in her gut, muscles taut. "You shall answer for this, Kirk."

"Sooner than you think," Kirk said. "We can't break the field."

Spock reached for the tricorder. "I am here, therefore it can be broken. Can you call the ship?"

"Kirk to Enterprise."

"Scott here, Captain, no progress."

"Mr. Scott, listen to me."

"Spock! Where have you been?"

"Details later. We have figured out how to break the barrier. Train your phasers directly on it."

"Aye, we tried that. All we managed to do is make a great cloudy spot on it."

"Then you are one step ahead of me. Feed what I tell you into the computer analysis. The barrier can admit organic matter if two living beings pass through from either side at the same point. I am not yet sure if mass makes a difference, but the gap seems to widen enough that a disproportionate amount on one side would work. As long as the two are of similar matter--humanoid to humanoid, or vegetable to vegetable."

"Are ye sure, Spock?"

"It has worked once," he said. "I believe it will work with simultaneous transporter signals passing through the same point as well. That is, if you were to beam someone down to these exact coordinates and beam us up at the same time,

through the weak point in the field, both signals would pass simultaneously through that weakened point--."

"And ye'd get through! Spock, you are a genius!"

"I know, but not enough of one. We have a problem and you have a problem. Our problem is that one of us is still in Kobec's hands. Yours is to decide who will beam down when we are beaming up, and to adjust the transporter to perform both functions at once."

"I canna do that," Scotty said. "Ye'll have to find a transporter platform on your world. Two opposite transmissions in one room? Even if I could wire it, which I can't, it would be dangerous."

"It is dangerous down here. We shall risk it, if you wire it."

Another voice joined Scott's. "You can't do it, but I can. That's what I came on board for, to fix the gadget."

"Janice," Kirk said. "Do you think you can do it? You may be holding our lives in your hands."

"It's tricky. I can't promise it will work," she said. "But I can promise that if I can't make it work, nobody else in Starfleet can."

Kirk the commander was back. Authority pulsed in every syllable of his orders. "Run it through the computer at once. Get to work on it. Stand by. We'll be waiting for your signal." He snapped the communicator shut. "Mr. Spock, we're going home."

"I must go back to the city. I must find McCoy."

"We tried a rescue, and wound up with a stalemate. Let's get back to the ship, and we can try from there. Down here, we don't even have a phaser."

"I must go back, Captain. I must go, and alone. I have offered the oath."

"Oath?" Kirk knelt in front of Spock, trying to fathom the alien complexities of his first officer.

"Do you remember when you assumed command of the Enterprise?"

"It's not a day I'd easily forget." And it seemed to distant.

"I swore an oath of loyalty in the tongue of my people. It is not one often taken, and never taken lightly. Of all that I am, and am ever to become, not to betray, not to abandon, not to harm. Until now, I had sworn it to no other living being but you. I just swore it to him."

Kirk smiled. "Now, whatever would make you do a dumb thing like that? It's hardly the first time one of you has saved the other's hide, is it?"

Spock's face clouded. "I am not sure why, Captain. All I know is that I felt an overwhelming compulsion to do it, and now it is done."

Kirk rose again to his full height. "Every instinct of my years on the line, everything I ever learned in the Academy, every scrap of common sense I was born with, tells me not to let you go. If we sit tight here and wait for them to retool that transporter, there is a chance--remote, but a chance--that we three can get back alive. If I let you go after him, I may lose both of you."

"Therefore, Captain?"

"Therefore, I am going to let you go." And if neither of you comes back this time? he thought, but he felt compelled to allow it.

Spock took a melon and ate.

•••

Rand pushed a damp strand of hair out of her eyes. "It's all done, Scotty. I never worked so fast in my life."

"Thank you," Scott said. "Let's hope it works."

"That's the problem. I can't guarantee that it will work." She rose from the hands and knees, closed the panel, and ran a double-check on the controls. "The most I can guarantee is that the circuits themselves will work. We can beam a man down from the far left platform with these controls--" she indicated a new set of switches, attached to the panel by a maze of wires--"while the other four are beaming up. As for the effects of operating both at once, so close together, all I can say is that it's never been tried."

"Spock calculated a four-to-one ratio would be sufficient. So we can bring

back the entire party at once and send only one. One pad is not operative. I needed the extra power."

"I can't guarantee what will happen to that one we beam down, but there are several possibilities. He might arrive in pieces. All in one place, but dead. Alive, all in one piece, but misassembled. Or he might not arrive at all. The field might just absorb him."

"The landing party?" Scott said.

"All the safety factors are on their side, including the planet's atmosphere and gravitation, plus whatever I could build in. They have a seventy-five percent chance of returning safely."

"Seventy-five percent? Ye call that a safety factor, lass?"

"A transporter's a finicky pet at its best." Her tightly wrapped self-control was beginning to unravel. "I took every possible precaution I could. And I put it all on the side of the landing party." He took her hand. "It's the one going down. I can't ask you to send someone, knowing how unlikely it is he'll ever get there."

"Look at it this way," Scott said grimly. "I've not met this Kobec fellow, but from what I can tell, it's better he not arrive. I want you to know, that whatever happens, there'll be a commendation for you."

"I don't want a medal," she said. "I want Jim."

•••

The flare was dying at last, as the first streaks of Limbo's lonely dawn cracked across the slate sky. A planet cannot—though life may dwell on it and energy pulse through its molten core—be said to be alive. But Limbo, only satellite of its aging sun would, if it could, be a lonely planet. A single world spinning between two empires, bringing forth grotesqueries as singular as its own position in the heavens, attracting and sheltering beings who perhaps in their own singularity, and innate evil, bred from the same dust as itself.

Limbo was a cosmic sport, existing to no purpose except to perplex and perhaps to ensnare more ordered intelligence.

Hatfield poked the flare, trying to coax forth more of the flameless light, but it was dying.

Kirk tried to think, but his thoughts were confused, overwrought. Another part of his mind stood apart, the calm starship commander, criticizing his performance in the third person. Well, Kirk, you've made a sorry show of this mission. You've lost an entire landing party; in trying to keep your command, you've lost that too; assuming you return alive to let the Council rip the braid from your arm in person. And now you sit here, thinking of, of all things, Delgado. You haven't been thinking clearly since you let those two on your ship.

Kirk raised his head to look straight at Commander Hatfield. //There's someone else in my head// he thought. //I don't know how you're doing it, but you've gotten in my head, haven't you?//

Without opening her mouth, //Yes,// she told him.

Kirk grimaced. He didn't want anyone doing his thinking for him, especially not someone who made such a mess of it.

Hatfield blushed, and he could feel her mind drawing away from his, like a naughty child rushing to hide in a closet.

He rose to his feet and seized the tricorder. "Take the communicator. Stay here. I'm going after Spock."

She rose also. "I must come with you."

"That's exactly what you mustn't do. Sit here and think of nothing. Least of all any of us. See nothing. Above all, FEEL nothing. Work on squaring the circle. Chant a mantra. But put us all out of your mind. Don't worry about us."

"How can I possibly do that?" she asked as he trudged into the brush.

"I don't care how. Just do it," he called over his shoulder. "If you don't, we're all dead."

•••

Scott reviewed the line, walking up and down, looking into each face. The

wrong thing to do, Rand thought. You can't look a man in the eyes when you ask him to die.

Scott shook his head. "I knew I should have done it by random selection," he said.

The six volunteers stood in a line, hands clasped at ease behind their backs.

Scott stood at the head of the line. "Any of you can back out now, and no dishonor on ye." Nobody moved. He stepped in front of Riley.

"Riley, back to your post," he said. "I canna order you to do it. You are not properly under my command. I canna send another man's officer to die."

"I'm sure my captain would approve, sir."

"If I were he, I would not want to lose such a first officer as you have become. You're a good man, Riley. We need you here, especially with Spock gone."

He stepped between Chekov and Sulu. "And who's runnin' the ship while you're both waiting down here to throw away your lives?"

"I put her on automatic, sir," Chekov said.

He stepped back to frame Uhura in his gaze. "And you, too. You've left your board in the hands of some rookie, when we're waiting for a message from the captain?"

"You did ask for volunteers, sir," Uhura said. "And if we had not been willing to come?" Her voice dropped menacingly low. "The captain has laid his life down for me more times than I care to count, Mr. Scott. Anyone can run my board. But the Enterprise without Captain Kirk?"

"No reflection on your own command capabilities, Mr. Scott," Sulu said, "but I concur with the lieutenant."

"In Russia we have a saying, that every man must die, but not every man dies like a man. I have never expected to live forever."

He stepped over to the other two. "And th' two of you, Chapel, M'Benga. When we bring them back up, who's to tend to them?"

He spun around in his best military pivot on one heel. They must see his back until he could clear the turmoil, the fierce protective love he felt for them all, from his face. "Back to your posts, all."

"And so what are you going to do, Mr. Scott?" Uhura said. "Browbeat some poor yeoman into going? Somebody has to do the dirty work. I don't envy your job, and I wish it didn't have to be done, but it's up to you to do it." She drew a breath. "I'm sorry, sir. I know that was insubordination."

"No, Lieutenant. It was true. And it was bonny of ye. But it does not mean I'll send you."

"The problem is still not solved, Mr. Scott," Riley said. "Sooner or later, somebody will have to go down. Nobody likes to lose a man. If Captain Kirk were here, he wouldn't enjoy making this decision any more than you do. But, by God, sir, he'd do it."

The seven stood at ease, hands behind their backs, waiting.

♦♦♦

Kirk stopped to pull a burr out of his hair, and recalled his frontier ancestors on Earth. Four centuries ago the pioneer Kirks had hunted, trapped and foraged their way across a continent, never easily and not always ethically, spreading their seed up to Canada, down to Texas, across the mountains. He doubted he was fit to stand with any of them as a frontier scout.

Spock's strength and swiftness made him hard to keep up with, and some stalking instinct of Vulcan's savage past led him from bush to bush and rock to rock, always to the most secure cover, leaving barely a bent twig or crushed leaf to mark his progress. He had the best of Vulcan, Kirk thought; the cunning and courage of his ancestors, the powerful brain and logic of his culture. If he did not want to be found by Kobec, Kobec would not find him; and surely such as James Kirk could not either.

Dawn had broken over the city. Scotty will be pulling out of orbit soon, Kirk thought. We may already be too late. At least we'll die knowing what we did wrong.

The sun glinted gently above the city, barely indicating the presence of the

not-quite visible energy dome. We can't get in, Kirk thought. We don't even have a phaser now.

The glint flared and died, and a glitter enveloped the city, to die as well. The shield had dropped.

That could mean one of two things. Either he isn't expecting us. Or he is.

The gates crashed open.

Alternative number two, Kirk thought.

No more than ten meters away, Spock crept out from behind a tree. He straightened and approached the city gates.

Before Kirk could come out of hiding as well, a fanfare blared, and myrmidons clustered at the top of the stairs. A fanfare blared, again. Taped, Kirk thought; those creatures could never play music. He shrank back. Okay, Kobec, before I tip my hand, empty those sleeves and let's see what's there.

A phalanx of attendants filed out as the churning see of myrmidons parted; a corridor of dishonor. Har Kal; Kirk's hatred for the beast-man was undiminished, but he no longer burned as he once had to bring the tyrant to justice. Starfleet has its bargain, let them deal with him, he thought. I want my men, my ship, my life.

The Romulan woman followed. Her only crime was to have been bested by him. But his pity passed. She has cast her lot with Kobec, he thought, and she's as bad as he is.

Mudd. The greasy, garish mound of hedonistic flesh had tried to warn him. Cheat, pest and sensualist he might be, but under Kobec's tutelage he had not learned to relish cruelty.

The line of rogues grew. Looking down the line of self-satisfied faces, marred masks hiding scarred souls, Kirk felt helpless. Once or twice before, confronting the Domsday Machine which ate entire planets, or the cloud-being which had taken the life of his first commander, Captain Garrovick, he had a sense of vast and ruthless evil. Now he saw how very much of it one galaxy could hold, and in how tiny a space it could be concentrated.

The fanfare blared again, and Kobec strutted to the apex of an angle of two lines of courtiers. His robes were voluminous, his scepter spiked.

"Vulcan!" he called.

Spock stood alone at the bottom of the staircase.

"Vulcan, why do you return?"

"You have something which is not rightfully yours. This life must be returned."

"And you have something which is no longer rightfully yours, your own life. The bargain has been reneged upon; there can be no more commerce between us; and I have fair compensation. Go."

Thorok brought McCoy forward. Even at his top form, the Human was no match for the mammoth Klingon-thing. Now, with his knee swollen to double the proper size, it was all he could do to walk.

Mudd stepped out of the line. "Listen here, Kobec," he said. "I do think this thing has gone really too far. This fellow's not a bad chap. Neither is Spock. Surely you could let 'em both go, you'd never miss 'em."

Kobec turned an awful glare upon Mudd. "I have one Human subject for my experiments. I can always use more."

"Only asking," Mudd said, and shrank away.

"Will you duel for him, one to one, as Klingon tradition allows?" Spock said.

"I am no longer bound by Klingon tradition. I obey no laws but my own. You have nothing to bargain with, Spock. In the end, I shall have you as well. You cannot leave this world, and you cannot hide. Beware the day I find you. For now, I shall content myself with what I have."

"Damn coward."

Kobec turned on McCoy. "You dare address me thus?"

"Why not? You'll kill me anyway. I might as well have my say. Coward, liar, torturer, lunatic, skunk, Denebian slime-devil. And I can think of lots more, too."

Give me time."

"Time is up," Kobec said. "You pique me, Human. I should have let Thorok rip out your voice-box." He turned to Spock, swinging the mace like a diabolical metronome. "Observe, Vulcan, my first experiment. A demonstration of the differences in durability between this —" he hefted the mace aloft — "and this Human's skull."

Spock started up the steps. "My demands are not negotiable."

"Five kilos of iron are not negotiable."

Kobec swung the mace at McCoy's head.

In that moment, a small section of reality went haywire.

The mace jerked off-course in mid-swing, hovered an instant, and dashed itself straight down on Kobec. The tawdry crown flew off, and Kobec's body, twisting and wrapping itself in the robe, pitched down the stairs to land at the feet of the astonished Spock.

Har Kal sprang forward. All the others froze to the spot. "Quick! Seize the Vulcan! Secure the Human! This is sorcery."

"Not quite," Spock said. Sensing danger, he fell to the ground. A low rumble came from deep in the woods, and an invisible juggernaut came plowing through the courtiers, up the steps. The non-leaderless followers were hurled against gates and walls. McCoy felt its imminence and braced for the impact. No impact came. Instead of knocking him down, it lifted him into the air and held him as if in the palm of a great hand.

Amid the corpses of courtiers Mudd stirred. The Romulan raised herself on one elbow and then dropped, gasping.

Kirk reached Spock. McCoy looked down at them both.

A low cry came from the copse behind them, rising to a wail.

"Daddy..."

Commander Hatfield lurched from the bushes, her skin a cool sheet of parchment, her eyes barely seeing. She looked from Kirk to Spock. Then she looked up, and the wail became a scream. She threw her arms around Spock. Then, as suddenly, she turned on Kirk.

The energy pillar which bore McCoy up exploded. He began flying all over the sky, swooping, weaving, barely missing the iron gates, hurtling giddily up only to plunge and ascend again. He fought vertigo for only a second, gathered enough breath to gasp "What in hell...?" and surrendered to unconsciousness.

"What's going on?" Kirk yelled, seizing one of her thrashing arms.

"Telekinesis, Captain. She's out of control."

"Get her back in, then. She'll dash his brains out. Then she'll start on us."

Kirk took an elbow in the ribs and grunted.

"There's only one way to do it, and I cannot. She cannot consent to the mind-meld in her state."

"If she understood she'd agree," Kirk said. "Do it, man!"

"Our minds are merging," he said. "Forgive me. I have no choice."

She forgave him. She reached out to welcome him and draw his consciousness to hers. "We are one," Spock said. "We are calm."

Her howl died to a whimper. Her arms fell to her sides. Spock gently clasped her body as he already clasped her mind.

McCoy pitched on the zenith of his flight, and cold, fresh air stung him awake. He hung, still, above the scene.

Am I dead yet? he wondered. He looked down. If I'm dead, I could understand Spock being here. But my leg wouldn't hurt like this.

"We are one. We are calm. We control the mind. Its power is at our command, and it obeys," Spock intoned, embracing her tightly.

Elegantly, slowly, McCoy descended. He set down in front of the trio on the steps. Kirk came to his side.

McCoy dipped slightly on his gimpy leg. Kirk shored him up.

"Well, you foolhardy idiot," Kirk said. "What have you got to say for yourself?"

"What else?" McCoy replied. "'Behold, I am the Archangel Gabriel.'"

♦♦♦

"That's the signal. We have to bring them up now," Rand said.

Scott looked at the row of volunteers. None had moved.

"You can't just leave them down there," Riley said. "Come on, Mr. Scott. I won't be missed, the ship's gotten along without me for two years."

"Kirk to Enterprise," came the disembodied rasp. "Beam us up. Get a medical team in there. I'm the only one who's whole here. We have one shock case, one lacerated belly, one busted knee and enough abrasions and contusions to fill a textbook. Get us up."

"This is it, lads," Scott said. "Somebody's got to go."

"We're passing over the weak spot now," Rand said. "This is it!"

"I will go."

Paco Delgado lumbered past Scotty and to the transporter platform.

"I can't believe you understand the risk," Rand said.

"I do," Delgado said. "I will die. I will be free." If he looked any more serene, I'd have to kiss his ring, Riley thought. And I do believe he does know what he's doing.

"I died six months ago, on Cynara I," Delgado said haltingly. "Kobec who made me as I am, is dead. I am just free enough to know that I will never be whole again."

Scott's eyes narrowed. "He's still a civilian. I dinna think I can do it."

Rand grabbed the controls. "I can. Court martial me. We're coming, Jim. Hang on."

"Tell Joanna I loved her," Delgado said.

Rand pushed one set of controls up, the other down.

Paolo Delgado, founder and president of the richest private empire in the universe, explorer, conqueror, buccaneer, dissolved into eternity.

The four columns of light beside where Delgado's husk had stood flickered, faded in and out, and buzzed.

"Reel 'em in, lass."

"I'm on full power. The forcefield energy is interfering with the signal." She grabbed the other controls. "I'm going to shortout the second control. If they're already through the field, it may just give us the juice to bring them in."

She knelt, tore the door from the panel, and thrust her hands into the circuitry. Sparks flew.

"Come on, Jim," she yelled as she seized the controls again. "Come ON!"

The four pillars thickened, brightened and dimmed to opaque masses.

"Welcome home, lads--and lassie," Scott whooped, and threw his arms around Janice Rand.

♦♦♦

Kirk pulled up a chair and positioned it between two of the couches.

"I'll have them up and around soon," Chapel said. "That is, if you don't tire them out with all this talking."

"She is taking excellent care of us, Captain," Spock said. "I believe I have put on weight."

Chapel patted his stomach. "I'm amazed it doesn't leak out of you. You're a sieve. What did you do, roll around on broken glass?"

"Something like that. It was not altogether voluntary."

Chapel turned to McCoy. "And the incredible flying physician here! You couldn't bruise a simple bone. No, it had to be a knee."

McCoy rose on one elbow. "It's a shame we can't get some of that miracle moss up here," he said. "On second thought, maybe it could put us all out of business."

"I suspect that it will be available sooner than you think," Spock said. "The survivors are few, and gravely injured. They will have to ask for assistance in order to survive, and they will let down the barrier."

Joanna McCoy Hatfield, in the third bed, sat up. "Survivors? I thought I bowled 'em over pretty thoroughly."

"You did. But your telekinetic attack was not intended primarily to kill, but to save the doctor. It killed only those directly in its path. A few on the periphery survived. They will, of course, be brought to justice."

Kirk felt a bit guilty to rejoice that Har Kal had been reduced to a few scraps of fur and a smudge on the stones.

"Mudd made it," Kirk said. "And the Romulan woman. And a few others."

McCoy drew a breath. "Go easy on Mudd if you can, Jim. He spoke up for us." Kirk nodded. McCoy turned to Spock. "So did you. Thanks for coming back for me. There, I've said it. One word and I'll take it back."

"I swore to bring you back and make you whole. Perhaps someday I shall call upon you to repay that debt. Besides, the commander's mental projections were so strong they left me no choice."

Joanna looked away. "I wasn't even aware I was thinking about it."

"Your projections were overwhelming. As indeed, they overwhelmed the captain and compelled him to affirm the bargain against his better judgment. Had you not let your thoughts wander to your companion Delgado, the captain might never have realized what had happened." Kirk nodded again.

"I wanted Paco back so badly, I would have done anything," she said. "I would have sold you, Mr. Spock. Or you, Captain Kirk. God help me." She buried her face in the pillow.

"You wouldn't sell your father, when the time came," Kirk said. "I think that speaks well of you."

"You have more than made up for any errors to which love led you," Spock said. "The planet is in Federation hands. Many of the most dangerous criminals in the galaxy are gone. Upon word of the death of Kobec the Federation has received its first ever message of congratulations and thanks from the Klingon Empire. And you save all of us with those inherited telepathic powers."

McCoy snorted. "Telepathic? Undeniably. Power? Definitely. Inherited? We've been through this before."

Spock turned to Joanna. "I offered to help you explore your powers. Perhaps the time is overdue for you to receive some formal training in their use, so that you do not fling force-storms and lift people off the ground every time you become overwrought. The Vulcan Science Academy is most advanced in these studies, and they have few Human subjects. My family could be prevailed upon for a letter of introduction."

"There's nothing to keep me, now Paco's gone," she said. "Sold." She looked at McCoy. "A.I.M. has plenty of money. I can buy out the rest of the time you owe Starfleet. Come and study with me."

"Waste of time," he said.

"Aren't you just the least bit curious to know if you have it?"

"No, I know I don't. If I could 'think' patients well, I wouldn't lose so many of them. And I'd start by fixing this knee."

Kirk shrugged. "If you don't believe you have it, then to all intents and purposes you don't. It's kind of like Tinker Bell."

"Tinker Bell?" Spock said.

"A fairy," Kirk said. "About as big as your pinky. With wings."

"She glows when you clap your hands," McCoy added.

"Fascinating," Spock said. It was clear he regretted he'd asked.

"Not that I'm condemning having an extra sense," McCoy said.

Joanna sat up in bed and leaned toward McCoy. "Ah'm tempted to say you could use any sense that's comin' your way, you have so little," she said in the most exaggerated accent she could muster. "Ah do declare, if you ain't jus' about the stubbornest thing ah evah met, suh!"

McCoy took her hand. "Now, THAT runs in the family."

Waves of love broke over Sickbay. Kirk could not stop smiling.

"I shall never understand parents and children," Spock said.

Kirk wondered briefly what it would be like to have a child, a son -- "Neither will I, Mr. Spock," he said, and was glad he never would know.





The Vivisection

Chapel motioned to Kosciwicz, and the young orderly turned to the largest crate. "Careful," she said. "Don't stick your fingers in the breathing holes, or it'll take them right off."

The orderly reached under McCoy's desk for the antigravity devices. The senior physician, without looking up, blocked Kosciwicz's reach with his knee.

"I told you, you'll disorient it," McCoy said. "It's unhappy enough as it is. There's got to be some way to teach you, but I haven't found it yet. Now use those muscles for something besides basketball."

"Yeah, sure," Kosciwicz stage-whispered to Chapel. "Mustn't harm a hair on its murderous little head, but I can break my back."

Kosciwicz shouldered the crate, and, stooping under its bulk, staggered into the office. "What the heck is this creature made of anyway?" he said. "Lead?"

"Might be," McCoy said laconically, absorbed in his tricorder readings. "I've seen stranger things. One of the few perks of being stationed on a starship, you know, is to discover totally new species like this. Play your cards right, and you might even get one named after you — though how anyone could ever get his tongue around a name like 'Kosciwicziana,' I don't know."

"At least it doesn't end in 'oy,'" Kosciwicz muttered. "That's pronounceable, but 'McCoyiana' looks dumb in print." He let the crate thud at McCoy's feet.

"Hey, watch that," the doctor said, switching off the tricorder tape. "That's a living thing in there."

"It killed three of our landing party."

"It's still a living thing. We don't know why. Sometimes there is a reason. Maybe we provoked it. I've seen that before, too."

Kosciwicz kicked the crate. A lumpish, fur-clad claw poked from the airhole nearest his leg. He jumped back. "So what's your problem, McCoy?" he said.

"Sir," McCoy said.

"Sir," Kosciwicz said. "It's a specimen. You're going to dissect it anyhow."

McCoy rose. "Absolutely right, young man. That is what is going to be done." He chewed his lip for a moment. "You're supposedly here for xenobiology training. How'd you like to do the honors on this one?"

Kosciwicz swallowed. "You mean alive? I've cut up dead ones before. But alive?"

"Come on, boy," McCoy said, and patted Kosciwicz on the back. "It's only a specimen. Right?"

Kosciewicz swallowed again and drew himself up to his full height. "Yeah, sure. It's only a specimen. And besides, we're men of science around here. Lead the way."

"Just as I thought," McCoy said. "All it's going to take is one. After the first one of these, you'll be just like me." He gave the orderly a paternal tap on the rear end, and pointed him toward the sonic shower. "Go scrub up. No time like the present for a little on-the-job education."

"Doctor," Chapel said, as soon as Kosciewicz stepped into the booth. "Is it really wise--"

"He won't be allergic," McCoy said. "And this may be the most important part of a medic's training."

Kosciewicz re-emerged, toggled for surgery. McCoy palmed a hypospray.

"One more thing..." he said, and deftly stabbed the young man's arm. Kosciewicz leaped back. "There we go," McCoy said. "All ready."

"What's that stuff?" Kosciewicz said, and reached for the hypo.

McCoy stepped back, putting his desk between himself and Kosciewicz. "Don't touch me. Don't touch anybody."

"What was that stuff?" Kosciewicz demanded.

"Something you never heard of," McCoy said. "It is the best damn teacher in the universe. That is an 'empathic.'"

"Pardon my ignorance," Kosciewicz said, "but what's an 'empathic'?"

"Told you you'd never have heard of it," McCoy said. "It is exactly what it sounds like. It amplified the sensitivity of the central nervous system to an excruciating degree. It makes it possible for one being -- a doctor, say--to experience the emotions and thoughts of another -- an experimental subject, say--through physical contact alone. If you put your hand on my arm, and I stub my toe, you will say ouch."

Kosciewicz nodded and donned his surgical gloves. McCoy smiled ruefully. "Won't help," he said. "It'll pass right through." He nudged the crate with his toe. It rattled of its own accord, and the angry claw protruded again. "Vicious little -- well, maybe not so little -- beast. Or maybe it's just scared. Maybe it knows what's coming."

"I don't think so," Kosciewicz said. "It's only an animal."

McCoy pointed to the label. "Spock says it's 'semi-sapient.' That means it has feelings, but not thoughts in the sense we have thoughts. That means," the doctor continued dispassionately, "that it cannot have any reasonable idea of why we are strapping it to a table and slicing it to ribbons and pulling out its guts. It won't be able to console itself with any of the fine-sounding, high-flown rhetoric we 'men of science' use for justifiable homicide. Stuff about 'the good of the majority,' or 'curing suffering in the long run,' or 'the overriding quest for knowledge.' It will, however, understand terror. And pain. Maybe it left a mate on the planet's surface, and a litter of pups or kits or whatever these creatures have. In which case it might also know sorrow, devotion, loneliness--"

"Stop it," Kosciewicz said.

"You got a problem, boy? You, a man of science?" McCoy said.

"Sir," Kosciewicz said, and glanced sadly at the crate. "I can't help wondering if there isn't some alternative to dissection in this instance."

McCoy became very sober. "I wish I could say yes. Not this time, though. In too many instances, there isn't. I try not to cut up a living thing if I can avoid it. I had to cut up a tribble once. Ever meet a tribble?" Kosciewicz shook his head again. "It wasn't fun. The little fella took a liking to me. I picked it up to put it on the table and the damn thing snuggled up in my palm and purred."

"Not that the Human race hasn't come a long way," he said, sitting back down at the computer terminal. "A couple centuries ago, the brutality and waste was appalling. There was a little half-hearted research into tissue cloning, computer models -- but nobody really cared about finding alternatives, when animals were cheap and didn't vote. The result was a slaughterhouse, which had to stop once we got into space. It's hard to experiment on a cat and then sit down to talk with a

K'zinti, or eat a ham sandwich with a Tellarite."

Kosciewicz was turning green, McCoy noted. Perhaps this boy needs a transfer to recreation, or statistics and files. "The oath I took, and which someday maybe you'll take too, says 'first, do no harm.' That isn't always possible. But there's a reason it's right up at the top. The pain of a fellow-creature is just like your own."

McCoy caught Chapel's eye, and she pushed a chair carefully across the room to Kosciewicz with a long-handled soil sample scoop. "Look," McCoy said, "the effects wear off in about two hours. Go back to your cabin. I'll do this one. It won't make you feel much better about it, but at least you won't have to watch. And if it's any further consolation, I'll be taking a shot of it myself before I start. A little suffering is good for the soul."

"Thanks, sir," Kosciewicz said. He pushed the chair away.

"With any luck, and maybe more clear thinking than we Humans deserve credit for, this stuff will be standard in all medical schools someday," McCoy said as he filled another hypo. "When we get back to civilization, I intend to write a paper on it."

"This stuff is new?" Kosciewicz said, peeling off the gloves.

"Empathy is as old as God himself," McCoy said, "but the drug is new." He expertly found a vein and jabbed himself.

"Where'd you find it?"

"Ah. It's cloned tissue. The glandular extract of a very remarkable lady I met once, on a planet you can thank your lucky stars you'll never visit. Gem taught me a thing or two. Nobody can teach me much about that." Chapel brought out a large collapsible dolly, and loaded the crate onto it with a groan and a heave. "Just on the floor, Chapel, please. I'll deal with it from there. And you," he told the ensign, "back to quarters for the next two hours. Straight to your cabin, no detours. Got it?"

"Got it, sir," Kosciewicz acknowledged. McCoy sank back into brooding as the young man passed him. Kosciewicz halted, and turned to him.

"Oh, and sir," he said, "thanks."

He dropped a consoling hand on McCoy's hand.

Chapel bolted back into the office at once as soon as she heard the cries.

Kosciewicz grasped one wrist with the opposite hand, staring at the flesh as if it were charred, and no part of himself. McCoy bent low over the table, head cradled in his folded arms.

The doctor looked up at Chapel. "It's nothing," he said weakly. "Go back to what you were doing."

She leaned over the desk toward him. "That's an order," he said. "And don't touch me."

She sighed, and returned to the grim task of scrubbing down the vivisection table.

"I thought I told you to get back to your cabin, mister," McCoy said wearily.

"On my way." He bent over McCoy, being careful not to touch him. He spoke in a subdued whisper close to McCoy's ear. The physician listened, smile, and motioned him to go.

"Doctor," Chapel said as McCoy headed for the sonic scrub. "What was all that?"

"I was right," McCoy said. "All it takes is one time."





Prodigal Son



"Base Commander's log, stardate 9887.33," the commodore recited. He let loose one long, weary sigh with all the keening sadness of his homeland on Earth whistling like wind through bare trees. Then he regained his authoritative voice, fiddling with the volume control with one hand, thumbing through the acting first officer's report with the other.

"Send in Commander Spock," he rasped into the intercom.

The door slid open, and Spock strode in. Stiff as a tin solder, the commodore thought. I can't believe he's facing this without any emotions, without even the comfort of grief. With one covert motion, he slipped the climate control down as far as it would go, without actually sliding it into "fur-bearing." Spock would sweat enough as it was, he supposed.

He motioned for Spock to take a seat opposite his desk, and returned to his log entry. "Pre-trial deposition and fact-finding in the case of WR39-733-906, Commander Spock, acting captain of NCC-1701, U.S.S. Enterprise. Charges--" He watched Spock closely for even the slightest twitch. Not one. Suppose he wouldn't give me the satisfaction, then. Well, bucko, you had your chance.

"Charges," the commodore continued. "Incompetence. Willful disregard of priority-one standing orders. Endangering the peace of the galaxy. Endangering the securing of the Federation. Possible pending charges: mutiny, two counts of wrongful death, one count of wrongful injury."

The commodore turned a flat, clear gaze on the somber figure. "How will you plead?"

"Point by point," Spock said, "not guilty of all charges. Not guilty of all potential charges, should Starfleet choose to press them."

"You do realize, Mr. Spock, that the only thing holding up those possible charges is Mr. Scott?"

Spock pinned him with a stare that would be audacious if there could have been any emotion behind it. "You might also say that the unfortunate condition of Mr. Scott is the only thing that is delaying dismissal of the charges."

The commodore wriggled in his seat, grasping at his slipping mask of dignity. Cool customer, this one. I wouldn't put it past this refrigerator to pull it off without blinking an eye. If we had a couple of corpses to back it up, things would also proceed much more smoothly," he said. "I'm very sorry we don't have them."

Spock closed his eyes, face still impassive. "I also would desire that we find the captain and the doctor," he said. "But I would prefer to discover them alive, whatever havoc it might wreak on your prosecution."

The commodore sighed, as if trying to discipline a stubborn child. "Mr.

Spock, nobody wants to come down hard on you. God knows, I surely don't." God also knows I surely don't want to tangle with that father of yours. "Starfleet has examined your request, in all its obvious absurdity, and believe me, if there were any way to grant it, I would, if only to prove the absurdity once and for all."

"I fail to see how I can prove my case if you will not let me return to the planet," Spock replied.

"But that's just the point," the commodore said. "There is no planet. None, Mr. Spock. The proverbial vacuum. I realize there's quite a bit in this godforsaken back pocket of the universe -- lots of lint floating about. And our best surveyors and cartographers have been known to make errors on an asteroid here or a moon there. But overlooking an entire planet does strain credibility."

"It was there," Spock said. "It downed our shuttlecraft. Captain Kirk, Dr. McCoy, Mr. Scott and I set foot on the surface.. Something on that planet sent Mr. Scott into his delirium. Something on that planet detained Captain Kirk and Dr. McCoy from their rendezvous with me, by devious means. And--"

"Devious means, indeed," the commodore snapped. "We have in your very own tricorder, in your very own voice, a distress call which you confess is false."

"I did not send that call," Spock said. A touch of Human irritability surfaced in his voice, to be submerged quickly at the commodore's double-take.

"Very well, then. If you say you didn't send that message, who am I to believe did?" the commodore said.

"Whatever is on that planet. Unless you let me return, there is only one possible suspect: I myself. And I did not kill them either by malfiasance or negligence."

"Then you really believe there was a planet there?"

"I am as sure, Commodore, as I am of the fact that in a base-10 numerical system, two plus two equals four. I am as sure of that planet's existence as I am of my own sanity." And he looked away.

Examining Spock's suddenly gray, averted face, the commodore shivered. He pushed the climate control up abruptly, and realized the temperature was not the problem.

Something drove Scott over the edge, he thought. Something he saw. Could it have been the sight of his two best friends, abandoned in the void by a man so deluded he dropped them off on a "planet" he was convinced was really there?

I've never seen a Vulcan go off the deep end before, he thought. Doesn't it make sense that when they finally do go, they go with a bang, like a bursting dike?

"I'll have you know, if I thought there were any chance that Jimmy would be out there, I'd be searching myself -- without a ship if need be," the commodore said. "Everybody knows how Jimmy and I felt about each other. I remember him from my cadet days."

Spock's head jerked up and he fixed his eyes on the commodore's insignia as if determining to bore through the fabric to the heart beneath. "Yes, Commodore Finnegan, he remembered your cadet days very well," Spock said.

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Dr. M'Benga watched Nurse Chapel fill each of the hypos. "No more than five cc's cordrazine every twelve hours, Christine," M'Benga said. "And discontinue immediately if Mr. Scott shows any sign at all of recognizing you or his surroundings."

Chapel laid the hypos in a neat row on the table, and double-counted them. A drop or two of cordrazine could kill a lesser man, but Scott was brawny, and whatever he was fighting was strong enough to throw off the powerful drugs like so much saline solution.

"I've never seen anything like it," M'Benga said, "not even among Vulcans. No pathology. No signs of disease or injury. But there's some kind of python wrapped around his mind, squeezing the sanity out of him, squeezing out the life." He laid a hand on the wheezing, laboring chest. "We ought to be thankful he isn't conscious, the pain he'd be in would be unimaginable," he said.

"If the cordrazine hasn't shocked him awake," Chapel said, "can anything?"

"Something has to," M'Benga replied. "All we can do is keep trying."

Chapel watched M'Benga bend over the supine engineer. The timer signalled twelve hours, and she mechanically lifted the hypo to the light. I hope this wakes you, for Captain Kirk's sake, and Dr. McCoy's, and Spock's, she thought. But, heaven help me for the sinner I am, if we can't cure you, for yourself, I hope it kills you.

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Spock touched a button to double-lock the doors of his cabin. Though he had been labeled a renegade by his superiors, he would take orders like a dutiful career soldier. House arrest was relatively lenient, and he would continue to take meals in the officer's mess of the Enterprise, where he could press his case with Riley.

He took up his lytherette and danced his fingers across the strings. He closed his eyes, and perceived his fingers knitting stray notes into a sad, alien song.

The melody sobbed, then wailed, mourning and raging by turns. Spock listened with interest and let his fingers roam as they would. Is this Vulcan? he thought? I had not known my people were so intimate with grief.

Yes, the precise calibrations of the notes, the tonal progressions, evoked a Vulcan's powerful intellect and passion for order. Alternating passages evoked a grave, stately grace as subdued as the rustle of priestly skirts on Mount Seleya. But between each respite, a wilder keening mingled mercury with iron. Could this be ancient Vulcan speaking, before the time of Surak? This song is like myself--a hybrid of two races--Vulcan and something born of hotter blood.

He laid down the instrument. How lovely, and how pitiful, he thought. First the dreams, and now this music. Music I never heard before.

Closer, Spock thought. I am drawing closer. To what, I must discover. He lay back on his bunk. Perhaps if he cleared his mind, the dreams would come again, unbidden, and not vanish with his sudden waking.

He no longer feared the visions and the daymares as he had the first time on the bridge, when Kirk had caught his limp body as it fell, and cried out to McCoy.

I am your instrument, he thought, play upon me, then unleashed the tension in his muscles, giving himself up briefly to whoever had brought him to the Lambda Psi system and its phantom planet.

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"Well, I'll bet you never thought you'd be in command of the Enterprise," Finnegan said, leaning back in his chair and transfixing Riley with a gleeful squint.

"No, sir," Riley said stiffly, "and I'd rather not be under these circumstances."

"With Spock under arrest and Scott hors de combat, you're really the only one to take the job."

"May I respectfully suggest Lieutenant Sulu, sir? Or Mr. Chekov, or Lieutenant Uhura? All of them are qualified -- and also regular crew member. I'm only there on loan."

"I'll be the first to pay homage to their qualifications, Mr. Riley," Finnegan said, "but they have drawbacks." He leaned forward conspiratorially. "You can tell they're not born Irishmen, eh?"

"I've never been one to hold that against anyone, sir," Riley said.

"That speaks well of you. But they lack an Irishman's -- what shall we say? Irreverence? Skepticism?" Finnegan picked up Spock's thick dossier and slammed it on the desktop, square in front of Riley. "They have a built-in bias toward this Spock fellow. They've worked with him too long. They're all too cozy with him, though how you can get cozy with a Vulcan is beyond me. If I let any of them run the ship, mark my words, Spock will be running the ship by intercom from his

locked-up cabin."

Riley sat up so straight Finnegan could hear his vertebrae crack like a string of beads snapping taut. "Mr. Spock has proven his command capability many a time, sir."

"His past record is not at issue. His recent behavior is suspect. I need someone whose ties to him are not quite so tight that he couldn't turn a critical eye on Spock if one be called for. I need you."

"I have a duty to the Avenger," Riley stammered. "Science Officer Vosselaer is swamped without me. Maybe a Spock can handle two posts at once, but the Avenger needs a first officer more than the Enterprise needs a carpetbagging captain."

Finnegan's lips drew tight. "You don't seem to understand me, Mr. Riley. I'm not offering you a choice. As the senior officer in this quadrant, I'm ordering you to accept the job."

Riley slumped in his chair. "But will the Enterprise accept me as captain?"

Finnegan leaned across the desk to slap Riley heartily on the shoulder. "No problem, lad. I'm not offering them any choice either."

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There it is, Kirk thought. That odor of frying eggs again. Is it morning already? Better get to the mess hall. Bones will be waiting with the juice...

His eyes fluttered open. There was no dining hall, no juice, and most disquieting of all, no McCoy. Instead, he lay in what seemed to be a small box of seamless steel, perhaps several meters wide in each direction, without even the seams of a door to lend direction to his confusion.

Where can I be? I seem to be no place, but Spock would tell me there is no such place as no place, wouldn't he? he thought. And where's Spock?

Memories of his last few conscious minutes on Planet Lambda hit him as a welter of lights, cries, and blurring figures. It all happened so fast, he recalled. He had arrived on the crest of the hill just in time to see McCoy fall, pistol-whipped by a Romulan who looked barely more than a child in his father's borrowed uniform. He'd spun in a circle to scan the horizon for Spock, then forward to see Scotty jogging down the other side of the hill into the ravine.

He'd reached for his phaser, fired once and missed on the run. The young recruit had shaken his useless disintegrator pistol, then knelt by McCoy, too close for either Kirk or Scott to get a clear shot. By the time Scott had gotten close enough to fire a clean blast, he'd found McCoy's own phaser and guessed how to work it. Scotty fell. The last thing Kirk remembered as he also fell was the sight of Romulan reinforcements coming through the bush, barely glimpsed through the undergrowth.

Well, at least I know Scotty must have been alive when he fell, Kirk thought. Thank heaven for Bones's stubborn pacifistic streak. If he'd obeyed my orders and set the phasers to max, we'd both have been fried like those eggs. Wherever those eggs were that were perfuming the cubicle, he wished the Roms would come and serve them up soon. Damn, am I hungry.

The wall creased, and lines cracked into a rectangle, which hollowed before his eyes to become a portal. Now at least I know which way is supposed to be "out," he thought.

The raw recruit he had seen on the planet materialized in the doorway, accompanied by a stocky, rough-hewn Romulan with glittering trim on his sash. Kirk did not recognize the accouterments of his uniform, but he knew the bearing as his own. This is the one who is running the show. If I can't be polite, he thought, I'd better be silent.

"It is time for your interrogation, Human," the Romulan commander said.

"Where am I?" Kirk said.

"It is for me to ask the questions, and your place only to answer. Truthfully, please, for my convenience and your continued, ah, comfort. For now, I will tell you that you are in the custody of the Rihannsu empire, and that it does not please us to harm you at the moment."

"Where are my companions?"

"Companions?" The commander said. He turned to his guard. "That is the plural form, yes? Meaning more than one?"

"We left one at X-point, after the ambush," the young soldier said. "Our transport mechanism was failing. We took only what we could safely bring to base." The soldier withered under his commander's gaze. "We took standard precautions, sir."

"Careless. Five demerit points and confined to quarters until further notice," the commander said, and turned again to Kirk.

"Where is my companion?" Kirk repeated.

"Your only concern is yourself. I cannot promise that your cooperation will help you, but your intransigence will profit nobody." The commander clasped his hands behind his back. "What is the Federation doing in this sector?"

Kirk pursed his lips. "I don't know."

"A commander of the fleet out in this area, and you don't know? I am not a fool!"

"Then perhaps you'll accept that I could be a fool," Kirk said. "But I'm telling you the truth. I don't know. It wasn't exactly my idea to come out here."

"Liar," the Romulan hissed, "as all Humans are liars. It is plain what you were seeking."

"Then I wish you'd tell me. I don't know," Kirk repeated.

"Very well, Human. If you 'don't know,' how did you just happen to have a Rihannsu with your party?" the Romulan commander said.

Kirk began to tell the truth again, and caught himself. What Rihannsu?

"Our sensors may not be as sophisticated as yours, but we can tell a Human from one of our own," the Romulan commander continued, tapping the toe of his heavy boot. "Besides our party, and other known and identified forms of life, our sensors showed three Humans in your party--and one Rihannsu," he said. "We did not catch the traitor, but if we do--when we do--he shall pay."

Kirk cupped his grimy chin in his palm, the better to hide the triumphant smile tugging at the corners of his lips. It's still short of making sense, he thought, but now I know something he doesn't. He thinks Spock was a Romulan. Spock got away. And if he doesn't know who Spock was, it stands to reason he doesn't know who I am either, or what ship has been hovering around here.

The smile, however subdued, came out into the open. Maybe I still don't know your game, Kirk thought. But you don't know your own game either, so we're playing with equal handicaps.

The commander caught Kirk's grin, and studied his face intently as if he could peel away the skin and look through to the brain. Then he matched Kirk smile for smile. "I believe we each know something the other does not know, and would like to know, very much," he said. "I propose an exchange of information. I give you thirty of your minutes to agree. At the end of that time, I shall ask you to tell me everything concerning your mission."

"And?" Kirk said.

"In return, I shall tell you everything concerning your companion," the Romulan said. "If you delay beyond thirty minutes, the exchange of information may still take place. But bear in mind that what I tell you may well depend on what you choose to tell me, and time is material. So choose your words carefully, and have them ready when I come."

The guard touched a device on the butt of his pistol. The wall shimmered and imploded silently, and the door appeared once again, on the opposite side of the room. Kirk frowned.

As the commander turned to leave, Kirk did choose his words carefully and quickly. It can't hurt to try, he thought, "Wait," he said. The commander stopped in mid-stride. "As a commander yourself, you must know the futility of wasting time on subordinates," Kirk said. "I'm the commander of my ship. If we had a reason for being there, I'm the one who knew it, and I gave the orders."

"So?" the Romulan said.

"My companion isn't in the chain of command. He's not even a soldier. He's a doctor. He can't tell you anything."

"So?" the commander repeatedly sourly.

"Spare him," Kirk said simply.

The commander's sour moue twisted into an equally acrid smile. "Nicely put," he said. "Your loyalty to your men is touching. Almost as touching as your naive assumption that your crewman is still alive."

The door vanished, and the Romulans with it, leaving Kirk alone in the dark with the maddening faint smell of fried eggs.

•••

Dressed to the teeth, Riley thought, squirming in his strait-jacket of dress uniform and dignity. Finnegan looks as ridiculous as I do, like Uncle George at the wedding who was just sober enough to be ashamed of how idiotic he looked. He ran his eyes over his fellow officers. They looked as embarrassed as he did. Where does Finnegan get off with those medals? Riley muttered half-aloud. As if he's seen action in fifteen years.

"If you have any comments, Captain Riley," Finnegan said, "you may address them to the board of inquiry." He tapped the bell gravely three times. "This panel is hereby convened. The record will note Mr. Spock is not present."

"Request we adjourn and reconvene at a time when Mr. Spock is feeling better," Nurse Chapel said.

"I'm afraid that request must be denied, Lieutenant," Surgeon General Boyce told her. "I personally have examined Spock at Commodore Finnegan's request, and I can find no physiological cause for this ailment."

"That doesn't mean it doesn't exist," Chapel persisted. "It merely means there are some things in heaven and earth -- and Vulcan -- that aren't dreamt of in your philosophy."

"Now, Lieutenant," Boyce said patiently. "You forget I did serve with Commander Spock. I agree, a few months aboard the same ship doesn't make me an expert on Vulcanian anatomy, but--"

"The modern term," M'Benga said stiffly, "is 'Vulcan.' Perhaps you have slipped further behind than you thought."

Chapel leaned forward, and M'Benga placed a warning hand lightly on her forearm. "I would think in this case, rank or no rank, you might defer to Dr. M'Benga's time on Vulcan and four years--"

Boyce struck the table. "Nurse Chapel! And I think you might defer to my fifty years in space medicine. I'm not pulling rank. I wasn't given all this braid because I know so little," he said, and crossed his arms.

M'Benga stood differentially, and Boyce smiled. "Sir, I would like to note on the record that Vulcans are not Humans, and Spock is neither Vulcan nor Human, exactly. You may not have found physiological evidence of illness, but that may mean we don't know the right place to look for it."

Boyce nodded. "Point well taken. Amend the diagnosis to include no known or identifiable reason." He smiled, and Chapel smiled back at the Surgeon General.

"Whatever his condition may be at the moment isn't material," Finnegan continued. "For all I know, he 's going through menopause. But I myself have reviewed Captain Kirk's log entries for the days leading up to this..." he rolled his tongue in his mouth, then spat the words, "this unfortunate occurrence. Almost the instant this ship entered the Lambda Psi sector, references begin to Spock's...ah..."

"Sudden 'fits,' he called them," Rear Admiral Skoln interjected. "Increasingly agitated, occasionally violent 'fits' of highly un-Vulcan behavior."

"I think he should be allowed some un-Vulcan behavior as normal," M'Benga objected. "I repeat, he isn't completely a Vulcan."

Skoln tented his fingers placidly and studied them. "Doctor, I am the last person you need to remind of that fact."

If he's not a 'purebreed,' Chapel thought, so much the better if that would mean he'd be anything like you.

"Admiral, 'fits' is a layman's term. Move the record read 'seizures.'"

"I am quoting the captain. While Humans may be sloppy in their terminology, Vulcans quote accurately. Request the record of my words stand."

Finnegan cut them off. "May we, in a Human layman's words, dispense with this petty squabbling? Or I swear on my grandfather's grave I'll exercise my rights as base commander to throw ye' all in the brig, rank and race notwithstanding."

All faced front, soberly. Finnegan looked at the granite face of the Admiral and decided to try pouring some oil.

"Admiral Skoln, as a Vulcan yourself, maybe you can shed some more light on Spock's behavior, since it seems to have us poor Humans bollixed."

"There are many possibilities," Skoln said. "As he is the first and only one of his kind, we cannot know what inherent genetic flaws may only now be surfacing. Understand, I am not blaming him. Clearly, the fault belongs with his parents, and their lack of prudence in not considering the possible consequences of their union. But, if indeed the flaw is bred in the bone, and promises to be chronic..."

"Then Spock's career would be over," Chapel said.

"I am sure in that eventuality, he could make a very comfortable life on Earth," Skoln said. "Certainly, he could not be allowed to return to Vulcan. For the meantime, he must be isolated from the rest of the crew so as not to contaminate them."

"Are you a doctor?" M'Benga said. "Are you a geneticist?"

"Out of order," Finnegan rapped, and tapped the bell sharply.

"My specialty is sentient plant life," Skoln said. "I have been five times decorated by the Vulcan Academy of Science. I think I may lay some small claim to knowledge of the Vulcan mind and body, being myself the possessor of an example," Skoln said.

Boyce snickered. Chapel glanced at him under her knit brows, and he rolled his eyes to the ceiling with a quick smirk. Then he recomposed his face an instant before Skoln turned to him.

"Doctor, I believe you have a comment?" Skoln said.

"Only that if Spock's been his normal self before he got here, and now he isn't, I think maybe we should consider that the problem isn't in his system, but in this system. Maybe there's something in Lambda Psi that stuck in his craw."

Finnegan's face softened. "A good thought. You've earned your bonus, Phil."

"I request we adjourn this hearing without a vote," Boyce said. "Keep Spock on status quo. Let me do some legwork — correction. Let me, and M'Benga and Chapel here, do some legwork. I'll notify you when we're ready to present our findings."

Finnegan tapped the bell. "Voice vote. Aye."

"Aye," Boyce said.

"Nay," Skoln said.

"You lose," Finnegan said, and banged the bell heartily. "Adjourned. Let's go hoist a few in the officer's lounge." Skoln looked at him as if the commodore were a particularly slimy mold.

"I'll take a raincheck," Boyce said. "I think my colleagues are chomping at the bit. You'll find us in the lab."

As the group dispersed, M'Benga and Chapel each came up at Boyce's elbows. "Well," Boyce said. "How'm I doing?"

"Acting Chief Medical Officer," M'Benga said, "we're reporting for duty."

"I have no tolerance for farfetched theories," Boyce said coolly. "I'm even more of an old-fashioned boy than Leonard was. But damned if I won't help you find what got him — and show up that stiffnecked Vulcan."

•••

The Scotsman's burly frame shook with another spasm. Fingers of pain sank through his muscles to weave themselves around his bones, and squeeze, and squeeze.

Dimly, in the alcove, he saw blurs of blue and black. I can hear ye! I can see ye! If I could blow off these smoke rings around my head, I'd tell ye. I'd tell ye everything, and there'd be the devil to pay.

"More cordrazine, Doctor?" Boyce said. "It can't be good for him."

"This is a desperate case," M'Benga said. "His brainwaves are so disordered that even his involuntary reflexes are erratic. I'd say his hearts keeps beating because he deliberately wills it to. That means he's in there somewhere." M'Benga measured out the dose carefully. "He's burning up everything he has in him. As long as he's in a frenzy anyway, our theory is to let the cordrazine take over the frenzy, so maybe his brain can concentrate on something else -- like dragging him back to reality."

"Hardly scientifically stated," Boyce said thoughtfully, "but I see the logic behind the concept. You've spent too much time with Len, Dr. M'Benga. You explain yourself too bluntly. Carry on."

Boyce sat back down at the spectro-analyzer. M'Benga left the alcove and with one smooth motion pumped the cordrazine into Scott's arm.

Scott became aware at once of every individual cell pulsing throughout his body; aware of the gush of his blood through even the tiniest capillary, the swelling and tension of each sac in his lungs, the prickling of each hair on his forearm as M'Benga's hand hovered a centimeter away. Then, he relinquished control, one by one, over each cell and capillary and sac, giving himself up to peace.

I'm dying at last, he thought, and began again to live. His eyes fluttered open.

"Boyce! Chapel! On the double!" M'Benga cried.

"What's going on? Don't tell me he's dead."

Scott clenched his teeth, and emitted one half-human growl. Then he slept, his breathing becoming rhythmic as breaking waves.

"Just as we'd hoped," M'Benga said. "The involuntary nervous system kicked in again. I don't know how it worked, but if I figure it out, I'll have to write a paper."

"Who cares how it worked?" Boyce exulted.

M'Benga soberly set about sterilizing the hypo. "If we don't know how it worked, and we don't know what was wrong in the first place, we don't know whether it could happen again. If he suddenly decides he can't trust himself to keep breathing, we may not be able to convince him again that he can." He busied himself with Scott's charts, brushing away Chapel's efforts to assist him. "Your old-fashioned instincts may not have proven correct in this instance, but they're on the mark in general. Too much cordrazine can't be good for him. I tried it when he was dying and had nothing to lose, but now, he does have something to lose." He gathered up the pre-filled hypos. "Chapel, please empty these. Don't leave this stuff lying around. Someone could get hurt."

A crash of breaking glass shattered the newfound calm. Chapel turned to M'Benga, who put down the last hypo and motioned to Boyce.

Spock met them halfway to the alcove. In either hand, he held a shard of what had been McCoy's best decanter. Chapel clutched at her neckline, vaguely relieved to realize that the puddle at his feet was only green Denebian beer.

"I was summoned," Spock rasped. "I was -- I was called to join battle. But the battle was won without me." He dropped the glass fragments and stood before them, recomposing his Vulcan mask of cool competence.

"You're supposed to be under arrest," Boyce said halfheartedly. "I won't report you if you'll agree to stick around for tests."

"I am quite myself again," Spock said.

"Perhaps. But your timing -- I may not be 'up' on Vulcans, but I can tell a pair of twins when you put them side by side. And I just saw two things side by side that look suspiciously like at least kissing cousins." He motioned for Spock to lie on the examining table nearest Scott's. The engineer was snoring peacefully.

"I assure you I am fine," Spock said. "However, there must be some lingering problem with my olfactory nerves. I seem to smell eggs."

•••

He's dead, Kirk thought, or they would have let me see him by now. He rolled over on his stomach, and propped himself up on his elbows. Maybe the pressure on his belly would take the edge off the emptiness within it. If they aren't going to give me any of those damn eggs, the least they could do would be to open a vent and get that aroma out of here. Maybe they don't know what Humans eat. At that point, Kirk would have eaten nearly anything.

One half-hour. They said one half-hour. It must be two days. Yes, McCoy must be dead by now. Probably died planetside, fractured skull; if these Roms are half as strong as Spock, almost certainly.

The wall buckled again, and glimmered, and belched forth the young centurion bearing a tray.

"Room Service?" Kirk said. The centurion did not smile.

"We believe this is edible, if not standard Human fare," the centurion said. "I am ordered to observe you eat it." He stepped back, at rigid attention.

"If I were you, I'd relax," Kirk said. "You're going to get awfully tired waiting for me to eat this, because I'm not going to."

"You must eat. It is an order from the commander," he said.

"When I join the Romulan army, I'll take orders from your commander," Kirk said. "Don't wait around at attention for that, either. This could be poisoned, or drugged. Tell your Commander he should thank me. If I starve, it saves him the trouble of getting his hands dirty with my blood. He's got enough blood on his hands."

The centurion blanched, opened his mouth to speak, then shook himself to strict attention again. "I am ordered to see you eat. You can be forced."

Kirk reached out for the tray. Some kind of purple-and-blue salad and a plate of unfamiliar but appetizing meat lay just within reach, and a flash of what he recognized as Romulan ale. He lifted the flash, and sniffed the contents. How flattering. They broke out the good stuff for me. I haven't had Romulan ale since--since--

With one contemptuous motion he threw the flask against the wall. The centurion broke attention to fling an arm across his eyes as pieces ricocheted across the room.

--Since bones gave it to me at my last birthday party. Boys, you just threw out the wrong bait.

He picked the tray up and ceremoniously upended it onto the centurion's shiny boots. Then he brandished a piece of the broken flask. The centurion stepped back.

"Tell your commander that the last time I sampled this sewage was with my companion. And the next time I taste it, or anything else, it will be with my companion. Or I will not eat or drink at all," he said.

The centurion scrambled to gather up the tray and pile the ruined food on it. He snatched the broken bottle from Kirk's hand, salvaged whatever dignity he could, and signaled the door to appear again. Then he was gone.

Kirk flopped back onto his stomach, and trailed his finger through a grease puddle on the floor. He put the finger in his mouth, sucked on it, and listened to the protests of his stomach.

•••

Riley sank into the chair. It only seems too big, he thought, because of the guys who sat in it before me. He hunched forward, sitting on the edge, ready to spring into Sulu's lap if the chair arms should reach up around him to strangle him.

"Relax, Cap," Sulu said with false breeziness. "If Finnegan didn't think you could handle the Enterprise, he wouldn't give her to you. And if we didn't think

you could handle her, we—" he grimaced. "Well, we'd still obey orders. But you'd know it, whether we told you or not."

Uhura swiveled away from her board to flash a smile at Riley, one which she hoped would seem more matronly than seductive. She recalled Riley's last night on the ship before his transfer. I'm going to have an awfully hard time taking orders from you, mister, she thought.

"Holding steady orbit and altitude, in synch to remain directly over Base 25, sir," Sulu said.

"As per your orders, sir," Chekov added.

"I didn't issue those orders," Riley said. "I've been in conference with the commodore. I just got here!"

"Well," Chekov smiled. "Those are the orders Captain Kirk would have issued, if he had been here. So we took the liberty of anticipating you."

"Oh," Riley said. This damn shirt's too big, too. I should have had a new one made up for me. Kirk's at least a 42 husky. He tugged at the underarms, trying to get the folds to sit a bit less awkwardly. It's like I was twelve years old again and the time that patrolman stopped me. "Go home, kid, and give your big brother back his uniform." But to have a shirt made up for me, when Captain Kirk will be back any minute...

He WILL be back.

Riley slapped the arms of the chair. "Well, Mr. Sulu, Mr. Chekov. Any other orders I ought to be giving?"

"Well," Sulu said with a sly grin. "You might ask Lieutenant Uhura for messages."

Riley slowly swiveled the chair and swallowed. "Any messages for me, Lieutenant?"

"Oh, yes indeed," she said softly. "I have a lot of messages. But none of them are for the captain. They're all for Kevin Thomas Riley."

"If everything's under control here, I'm going for coffee," Riley said hurriedly. "Lieutenant?"

The two stepped into the lift.

As soon as the doors slipped shut, Uhura clasped Riley's shoulders. "Kevin, they want to work with you. Nobody expects you to be Captain Kirk. Being Kevin Thomas Riley is plenty."

Riley shook his head. "Look, I know I'm a pretty good officer. Well, maybe as an ensign I was a bit of a jerk."

"Just a little bit," she said. "But you didn't know me on my first mission. We all trust you. Even Spock."

"Spock," he said. "Boy, could I use Spock on the bridge. But the one real restriction on my power as Captain is that I can't let him out of his room."

His eyes lit up. He and Uhura turned to face each other. "You realize we'll join Spock in the brig if Finnegan finds out?"

"I'll risk it," Uhura said. "I owe you one, for the best night of my life. I can put the hookup on very low frequency, and Base Communications will never think to look for it. Pick it up on your hand communicator."

"Thanks, Sparks," Riley said. "I just don't have the responsibility or maturity to take it all on by myself."

"Mr. Riley," Uhura said, "you have just made one of the most mature and responsible decisions of your life. Not even Captain Kirk has entirely learned to admit when he's out of his depth."

The lift, having quietly completed the trip to the mess hall and receiving no signal to discharge passengers, had nearly finished a return journey to the bridge.

The doors opened automatically. Chekov and Sulu reflexively glanced over their shoulders, and quickly addressed themselves to their instruments.

"Imagine," Riley stage-whispered to Uhura as he pointed at the blushing crewmen. "A captain kisses a junior officer on the bridge, and all discipline breaks down."

•••

"Well, Human? Has your belly talked sense yet to your brain?" the Romulan commander queried.

"I sure would like some of those eggs," Kirk said weakly. Thank God for gravity. If he hadn't had his hand under his chin, his head would have fallen to the floor.

"Eggs?" the commander replied. "What, please, is an egg?"

"Beg your pardon, sir," the centurion said. "I understand that in Human and some related cultures, they eat the unborn young of birds. That is, they eat, ah, c'nythan, sir," he said.

The commander's nose wrinkled. "Barbarous. I assure you, we do not practice such abominations among the Rihannsu. These -- whatever -- are not the only thing Humans eat, though," he said. "We would be willing to provide you with suitable food other than this offal."

"Not under your conditions," Kirk said.

"We have offered you food, without conditions," the commander said. "It is you who are setting the conditions. And you treated my son most rudely. I suppose it is to be expected of any creature so low as to consort with a traitor to the empire."

"I tell you," Kirk responded wearily, "only the truth. We had none of your people among us."

"Sir," the aide said, "our computer search of known defectors has turned up no male Rihannsu among their number. A female or two; it seems our women are unfortunately somewhat susceptible to alien charms. But no males."

"I am aware of the result of your search, Centurion," the commander growled. "I am not aware of its possible relevance to--"

"I am saying, sir, that perhaps he is telling the truth."

"I've told you everything you're going to get out of me," Kirk said, "but the little I've told you IS the truth."

The commander began an exasperated rat-a-tat with his toe an inch from Kirk's drooping head. "We will learn who you are, and why you came here. You are one man, we are many. You have only your own failing strength, and we have our ships and weapons." He turned to go.

Some debris of Vulcanoid scruple nearly moved the commander to tell the Human the truth. Perhaps if they sent him back to Starfleet with word of the two dozen wretched outcasts under his sham command, who could not even recharge their pitiful "weapons" because their aging, uncloaked supply ships dared not venture out so close to the Humans' new outpost -- mercy might move them to help.

Or range might move them to obliterate us. Silence. Allow him to conjure fleets and numberless armies in his head. You need not lie, but if you fail to tell the truth the Human will lie to himself.

"Food will be sent again. The choice is yours."

"Wait," Kirk said. "My companion?"

"The one he came to rescue," the centurion explained. "The one in the blue shirt."

"Oh, yes," the commander said. "Clearly, you failed to rescue him. 'I have told you everything you are going to get out of me, but the little I have told you IS the truth.'"

The darkness descended again on Kirk, and he was alone with his hunger.

•••

Boyce ran his hand-scanner over Spock's chest. He tucked it back into his bag and shook a mock-scolding finger at Spock. "Whatever is causing these spells of yours, you're hiding it pretty well," he said. "I wish the disease were half as visible as the symptoms. Are you taking those vitamins I prescribed?"

"Yes," Spock replied, and lay back on his bunk again.

"With meals?"

"I have had little appetite lately. Great hunger, but no appetite."

Boyce sat on the bunk. "Look here. I'm not against you. I'm trying to help

you restore your credibility. But if I can't even get you to eat--"

Spock sat up abruptly. Boyce edged back.

"Doctor, you have stayed more than ten minutes past your allotted time," Spock hissed. "You must return to Sickbay."

"I don't 'must' anything," Boyce said, accentuating his words with a soft rap of the knuckles on Spock's chest. "I made up the sickbay duty roster, and I can officially redraw it. So why don't we take this opportunity to discuss--"

"I tell you you must leave now." Spock seized Boyce's arm and flung him from the bunk to the floor like a pile of soiled clothes. The doctor rolled on his back, snapped his spine forward, slammed the floor once with his palms, and sprang to a fighting crouch.

"All right," he said. "You want to wrestle, we'll wrestle. I haven't been behind a desk all that long."

Spock's face creased into a tense mass, as if he were folding in on himself. Involuntarily, he drew half-bent arms behind him, ready to meet any move with nails and teeth. "Doctor, get out. Get out now."

Boyce sidled toward the door, one eye on Spock, one hand on his communicator. I've never believed in making house calls with a charged phaser, he thought, but perhaps I'd better reconsider.

Spock became rigid where he stood, frozen briefly in some private horror Boyce could not share. Gradually, the muscles of each limb seemed to detach themselves, twitching independently and at random. He fell back on the bed, a shivering mass, clawing at the air, howling.

Boyce flipped open the communicator. "Sickbay! Down here! Spock's cabin. Now! Bring everything -- and a straightjacket."

Spock's howls gradually assumed a pattern. No less frantic, they seemed to Boyce to form a song, or perhaps a poem, in a tongue full of sharp vowels and clicking consonants.

Chapel, M'Benga and Kosciwicz, McCoy's head orderly, arrived to find Boyce scrunched against the wall, cowering and ducking Vulcan memorabilia and pillows. "Hurry," Boyce said. "If you can't get close enough for a shot, gas him."

Spock stopped dead in his tracks. "No," he said. "No gas. Please." He shuffled docilely away from Boyce and the medical team, still mumbling.

The cabin door slid shut on an empty room. For a moment, all was still. Then a shrill whistle split the air.

"Spock?" Riley's voice sounded over the hidden communicator. "Spock, I know you're there. You've got to be. I need your advice. Come in."

•••

"Centurion Pol," the Romulan commander said, "I think it is possible you have been on duty in this outpost too long."

The young Romulan hung his head. "I meant no disrespect, sir. I respect your judgment completely. I merely made an observation."

"I admit I have much more limited knowledge of Humans than you," the commander said. "But I can be humble when it is due. You surpass me in this field." He snapped his fingers, and the centurion returned to attention. "I certainly devoted all my early training to serving the Praetor, and had no time left for such unwholesome pursuits as the study of Humans and their loathsome habits. Bird embryos, indeed. Still, I do know a few things, which I had thought were common knowledge among all educated and loyal Rihannsu."

"Such as, sir?"

"Such as the fact that Humans are incapable of telling the truth."

"With all due respect, sir. If the Human is indeed incapable of telling the truth, why do we keep trying to get him to do it? Why not just kill him?"

The commander thought a moment of Kirk's pasty, haggard but defiantly set face. He could not admit that he respected this prisoner, and did not enjoy killing anyone. Unable to lie, he came up with an equally valid excuse. "We must get at least his name, rank and serial number out of him. Besides, at least this

one talks. I had begun to believe perhaps they were completely mute."

"Some are, sir," the centurion said, "usually due to injury, or birth defect."

"The yellow-haired one is not," the commander said. "A loyal Rihannsu's duty is to make him talk. Unless you are suggesting there is something wrong with our sensors."

"I warrant there is not, sir," the centurion said. "I myself discovered the Rihannsu among them. I headed that patrol."

"Indeed. And you earned a commendation and three merit points for your synthesized 'distress signal,' " the commander interjected. "Now you seem to be balking at the inescapable conclusion of your discovery. If he does not know, if no Rihannsu brought him here, why would he and his men have come?"

"I have no suggestions, sir. I'm just saying that--" he broke off, and his military discipline dropped away for a moment. "It seems cruel, sir. He won't eat, and — he keeps asking--"

The commander also dropped his military bearing, and laid a hand on the quaking centurion. "Sometimes cruelty is inherent in our duty. This entire outpost is founded on cruelty. The Praetor does not ask me to relish this assignment, only to fulfill it. But you, son--" he suddenly, fiercely, swept the centurion into an embrace. "Permit me to transfer you. I remain here to pay for the wrongs I have done your mother, and your sisters, and you. You are paying for a crime that was not your own. For the last time, let me send you away."

The centurion slipped under his father's arms and strode to the far end of the room. "Transfer me? Where? To the homeworld? You know I can never go there. I am welcome only here, with my own kind. I have a duty to them, if not to the Praetor." He saluted and turned. "With your permission, sir, I shall prepare another tray of food suitable for a Human."

The commander saluted. "As you will. I will perform crowd control duty this shift. Carry on."

The centurion met the commander's smile with a stiff salute and marched out of the room. The commander donned a heavy belt hung with weapons. Thank the gods for that tranquilizer gas, he thought, however carrion-like it may smell. And may the gods curse the Praetor. The mistake was his, and twenty-five cycles we have paid for it. I have paid in peace of mind, and with my son and daughters and the wife I could not keep.

•••

"Spock's resting peacefully, Doctor," Chapel said. "No recurrence of symptoms so far. I've posted a round-the-clock watch on both him and Scott. Kosciwicz will see to them both."

Boyce pulled his chin thoughtfully. "I'm not certain that's wise, to keep them in the same room. Their symptoms are too similar. If one triggers the other--"

"I know what triggers the episodes, sir," Kosciwicz interrupted. "As far as Mr. Scott is concerned, anyway. Most of the time he sleeps. A couple of times he's asked for technical journals. He's back on solid food. And then you ask him what happened on the outskirts of Lambda Psi, and it's time for the cordrazine again."

Boyce turned purple. "You mean," he began with murderous calm, "you have been interrogating him? When I explicitly ordered he be allowed to rest?"

"Not I, Doctor. Admiral Skoln. He insisted," Kosciwicz replied. "I tried to explain. He's coming back at 0600 to question Spock."

"He thinks he's going to question Spock," Boyce said. "Leave it to me to relieve him of that delusion. But you say otherwise Scott's lucid?"

"A little the worse for wear, but pretty good, considering."

"I chased Skoln out when I spotted him," M'Benga said. "And I authorized the cordrazine. He was fine, even chipper, until Skoln asked what happened to him and the others."

"He just seemed to short-circuit," Kosciwicz said. "The involuntary reflexes stopped. Fortunately, Scott doesn't give up that easy. His conscious brain took

over. He literally ordered his heart to go on beating. But how long can a man keep that up, having to think about just staying alive?"

Boyce scowled. "From now on, keep that pointy-eared autocrat out of this sickbay. And Spock?"

"I don't know what universe he's in," Kosciwicz said, "but it isn't this one. He wakes up every now and then, and croons. He ignores me. Not in Standard, sir. According to the Admiral, not in Vulcan, either. At least, not in Modern Vulcan. Middle-period Vulcan, the Admiral said. I let him tape it so he could study it."

"Call me if he gets violent. Otherwise, just give him a wide berth," Boyce said. "Vulcans heal themselves, given time and peace."

A soft, low crooning drifted through the doorway. The voice was familiar to all, the tongue unknown. The mood of the song was unmistakable. The futile tears of a lost race washed each note, and the rage of revenge owed but unexacted lent an acrid echo to each low note.

I wonder how much time we have to let him heal, Boyce thought. I know he doesn't have peace.

•••

Commodore Finnegan settled into the captain's chair. He resisted the urge to kick his boots off and pour himself a drink. Then he gave the arms one merry whack, spinning the chair dizzily around twice until it slowed to a halt directly facing the navigator's post.

"Well, Riley," he said, "I think we'll find the crew in much better spirits, now a real officer's in charge of the bridge. Right, Ensign?"

Riley pretended to address himself to his navigation board.

"So did ye' think your litter scheme wouldn't be found out?" Finnegan continued. "Pity you were captain at the time. I couldn't charge you with mutiny. I had to be content with busting you, and of course ripping out that communications patch." Riley flinched. "To think that I trusted you with the flagship of the fleet, and you put it into the hands of a madman for two whole days. I'm disappointed in you, lad. But then, I shouldn't have expected sense from a Londonderry man."

"Blasted Dubliner," Riley muttered, bending as far over his controls as possible without rubbing his nose in the scanner.

"Report," Finnegan."

"Maintaining standard orbit, sir," Chekov said. As Finnegan swung again tot he first officer's station, he gave Riley a quick pat of condolence on the former officer's slumping shoulder.

"Acting First Officer Sulu," Finnegan said. "Anything out of order?"

Sulu bristled briefly, then bit his tongue. "Nothing out there, sir," he said crisply, and exchanged grimaces with Uhura as Finnegan spun to the front.

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The centurion paused before the portal to rearrange the food on the tray. He knew from bitter experience how hard captivity could be, and a meal could be a small pleasure in a nightmare of pain. He looked to either side; no other crewmen present. Then he removed the flask of water from the tray, and substituted the ale from his own ration.

Let my father punish me. He can incur no more guilt than he already bears.

Then the centurion touched a button on his pistol butt, and the portal appeared.

He stepped into the cell quickly, closing the door behind him, and set the tray on the floor. He smiled.

"Come, eat," he said in his rusty, halting Standard. At least he understands. Why can he not speak? Perhaps he is indeed a mute, as my father suggested, the centurion thought. He squatted on the floor and pushed the tray forward. The prisoner did not move, except to turn a pair of haunted, suspicious eyes on him.

The centurion met the angry blue gaze with his own opaque black stare. Then,

reluctantly, the prisoner took up a piece of flat bread and dipped it in the stew. He held it out to the centurion.

The young soldier took it, with a shake of his head. "Why can you not understand?" he said. "I am younger than you, and far stronger, and you are utterly in my power. Had I wished to kill you, I would have snapped your neck, not poisoned you as some low Klingon might."

The icy gaze did not let up. The centurion shrugged, and chewed the bread. The prisoner followed suit, listlessly.

Poor cripple, the centurion thought. He must surely be a mute. How strange we should have picked up such a pair. One eats, but does not speak; the other speaks, but will not eat.

The prisoner pushed the tray toward the centurion, and pointed. The centurion broke another piece of bread, dipped it, broke it again and passed it to the Human, and the two ate in silence, taking alternate drafts from the same flask.

•••

Kosciewicz paced back and forth between the two beds. Boyce had instructed him to call full staff if either stirred. He sincerely hoped neither of them would revive on his shift.

Whatever gods there may be in such far-flung voids as Lambda Psi did not hear him. Spock began to thrash and groan.

Kosciewicz headed for the intercom, only to be stopped in his tracks by another moan behind him. Scott had hauled himself up on one elbow, sweat starting to bead on his brow, clutching his chest as if to squeeze his failing heart into pumping sludgy blood into dying cells.

"Laddie," Scott wheezed. "Damn it, I know. I have to tell ye--" Then he collapsed with a cry.

Scott's seizure seemed to trigger Spock, whose spine whipped backwards, arching his chest against the restraints.

Kosciewicz lunged for the intercom. "Doctor Boyce, Doctor Boyce, come quickly! Now!" The intercom was silent. What a time to take a trip to the head. He switched channels, punching button after button, almost at random. "Chapel! M'Benga! Anybody! God's pity, get down here! They're dying!"

The sharp, subsentient yowls of the Vulcan, and Scott's semilucid pleas and wheezing, pulsed through his pounding temples as he frantically ran through the intercom gamut. The sensors on the diagnostic beds beeped in lunatic counterpoint. Damn it, Dr. McCoy warned me there'd be days like this. What would he do, if he were here?

He dashed back to the beds, planting himself between the patients, whipping in a circle from one to the other. He'd say to do anything, but do something, because it's got to be better than nothing when things get this bad.

Spock's heaving chest burst the buckle on his restraint. He rose into the air in one convulsive arc, then dropped on his side, facing Scott.

The orderly turned again, looking from Scott to Spock and back. So similar were their separate deliriums, he was not sure for a moment which was which.

Hey, wait just a minute. If they both have the same thing...

He reached down to untie Spock's legs. Then caution took over for a moment. I could have two crazy men on my hands, even crazier than they are now.

He loosed the restraint. If I don't do something now, I'll have two dead men on my hands. Scott can't take any more cordrazine, it'd blow his gaskets. And McCoy told me no Vulcan can endure this kind of emotional onslaught for long.

Kosciewicz ran behind Spock, shoved him off the bed, and threw the bewildered Vulcan on top of Scott. McCoy also told me a lot of other stuff about Vulcans, too. He ran to the far side of Scott's bed, gripped the nape of Spock's neck with one hand, and clutched Spock's wrist with the other. Gently, but firmly, he guided the hand to Scott's temples.

Okay, boys, the young medic thought. Let's see how badly you really want to live. Let's see if that "Vulcan mind meld" is all it's cracked up to be.

Spock's knotted fingers tightened around Scott's forehead. I'll be,

Kosciewicz thought. It's instinctive. He bent over and whispered into Spock's ear, hoping to plant a suggestion.

"Look, if you won't tell your kindly friendly doctors what's wrong with you, tell each other. Maybe it will make you feel better."

Spock and Scott breathed heavily in unison, the engineer's arms locked around the Vulcan's neck as if both were going down with their ship. Kosciewicz fidgeted, needled by the feeling he was watching something slightly obscene, or at least too intimate for his eyes.

"Remember," Spock intoned. "Remember."

"I remember," Scott said softly. "I remember." His eyes blinked open. "And I can still breathe!"

Spock rolled off the bed and landed on the floor with an undignified bump. He also blinked once, and shook his head to clear out the cobwebs.

"That was it," Spock said. "The missing link. Of course." He attained his feet and stabbed an accusing finger at Scott. "Why did you not tell me sooner what you saw?"

"Ach, I couldna," Scott said, too happy to be sound again to be irritated by Spock's tone. "Those devils, they planted some kind of bug in my mind. They made me believe I'd die if I did tell ye."

"I have removed their hypnotic suggestion," Spock said. "A briefing is long overdue." He surveyed the gaping, pale orderly. "Mr. Kosciewicz, you look not at all well." He motioned to the bed where only minutes before he had lay in near-death agonies. "Perhaps you would care to lie down?"

Kosciewicz reeled to the intercom. The auto control was still shuttling his emergency message among the medics' private quarters. The monitor showed Boyce had responded and was on the way; Chapel's frantic queries for "information, please," blared from the speaker.

"Kosciewicz, here," he said. "Chapel?"

"Kosciewicz! What is going on down there?" Chapel demanded.

"Nothing anymore. But please get down here anyway. I handled it...with a little homeopathic medicine." He switched off the intercom and turned again to the two former patients. "You look okay," he said. "But appearances can be deceiving."

"I'm fine," Scott said.

"Lie down anyway, Spock?"

"At present I am thoroughly in possession of myself. I cannot guarantee that there will be no more episodes. However, now that I know what is causing them, I believe they will be less severe, and not interfere with my duties."

Kosciewicz sat on the edge of the bed.

"Oh, and one more thing," Spock said. "I believe it is customary under such circumstances for Humans to say, 'thank you.' A very astute move on your part."

Kosciewicz grinned weakly. "All in the line of duty. We medical men have to learn to take this kind of thing in stride." Then, gratefully he doubled over and threw up at Spock's feet.

♦♦♦

"Roms? In my sector?" Finnegan blurted. "The devil you say!"

"If what I hypothesize is true, Commodore, though Vulcans have neither god nor devil in the Human sense, in a way that would be the case." Spock tapped the table with a restless forefinger. Chapel watched him. He says he's well, but he's like a man obsessed, for all his rigid control.

"The Vulcan 'devil' is savagery," Spock continued. "We have striven for centuries to subdue our darker impulses and turn that strength to nobler purposes. But others of our kind, long ago, let these impulses loose, and savagery rampaged through their tribes. Were Vulcans to have a 'devil' — the spectre of the worst of our natures given free rein — that devil would wear a Romulan face."

Skoln bent forward. "That of which you speak is but a legend, and not one for outworlders," he said. "I propose that this entire line of inquiry be dropped,

that Commodore Finnegan's outpost be disbanded, and that this entire system be placed along with Talos IV under the proscriptions of General Order Seven: utter quarantine."

"Now see here," Finnegan said. "You can't do that to me. This is my jurisdiction. I spent ten years working to get a base of my own."

"I am sure Starfleet will find some other use for your talents," Skoln said dryly, "such as they may be."

"Admiral," Spock said, "if the Lost Colony is as you say, a 'legend,' then surely there is no reason to seal off the sector, because there is nothing to find."

"But there are Rihannsu here," Skoln said. Some of the conviction had ebbed from his words, Boyce noted, and he took the opportunity to join the fray.

"There are either Romulans or Klingons all over the galaxy, wherever we aren't," he said. "We've never let them cow us before. Far as I know, we have as much right here as they do."

"You tell 'em," Finnegan said.

"I agree with Spock," Boyce said. "They have a lot in common with devils, Earth devils as well as Vulcan devils. And they've made off with two of our own -- one the captain of our best ship, the other one of my prize students, and both two of the best drinking partners I ever had. Gentlemen," he concluded, "I'm not a vengeful type, but I'm going in with phasers blazing to pay them back, if I have to take a shuttlecraft and go alone."

"Aye," Scott added. "And not only for my friends -- I owe the Roms a little taste of what they did to me."

"I am not quite so hot-blooded," Spock said. "I would like to satisfy my intellectual curiosity as to what truth, if any, lies behind the legend of the Lost Colony."

Skoln rose and gathered his dignity about him, decked out in his Vulcan self-possession like a Samurai warrior in his armor. "If there were a Lost Colony, Mr. Spock, it would be no concern of a true Vulcan. The legend is meant to stand as a cautionary tale to our people of the consequences of backsliding, and attempting to compromise with the remnants of our lamentable past. Surely you must have been raised in the Vulcan ways, even in such an unorthodox home as yours," he said, straining his words through clenched teeth, clutching at patience. "There were no 'Colonists,' no 'Rihannsu.' It was all metaphor."

"I am not convinced," Spock said. "Rather than endure my doubts, which appear to frustrate you so, I would assume you would desire to prove yourself conclusively right by traveling to the end of the system to find there is no colony there."

"There are only five planets in this system," Finnegan said. "We've checked them all out. There's nothing on them, at least last time we looked. And you can't support life on any of 'em, except this one. The three in close to the sun are too hot, even for you Vulcans. The fifth one out is temperate, but the gravitational field's an anomaly."

Spock raised an eyebrow. "How so, Commodore?"

"Out of proportion to the mass. Way out. At least twice what it should be. We didn't go planetside; we wouldn't even have been able to stand, if the sensors read right."

"Maybe they don't read right," Scott said.

"Or maybe they do," Spock said, "but not for the reasons you think. The most logical reason for the gravitational pull of at least two planets is -- two planets."

Finnegan slapped his forehead. "Back to the starting point again! To that planet that doesn't exist."

"Many things exist which we cannot see," Spock said. "I remember a time when a Romulan ship was occasionally counted among those things, due to their cloaking device."

Finnegan folded his hands on the table, and tightened the intertwined fingers until the knuckles whitened and bulged. "Mr. Spock, maybe you had better return to

Sickbay. You appear to be having your delusions again. It is impossible to cloak an entire planet."

"Three years ago, we thought it impossible to cloak a ship," Spock responded.

"But they figured out how to do it," Scott said. "And once we got our hands on the beastie, not only did we figure it out too, we've been doing it bigger and better ever since."

"The Romulans may be, as Admiral Skoln terms them, 'savage,' but they are not stupid," Spock said. "If the Federation has improved on the device, surely they have also experimented."

"We know how to break through it," Scott said. "I can do that easily, now that I know to try. But the thought would never have occurred to me that there was any reason to try." He rose, almost jiggled toward the door, eyes alight at the prospect of another technical challenge. "Excuse me, gentlemen, I'll get right on it."

"Lost Colony indeed," Skoln said. "And even if such a thing were there, how would we find it?"

"I shall guide us," Spock said. "You see, the Middle Vulcan you tell me I have been speaking is not Middle Vulcan. It is a dialect of Modern Rihannsu, with Vulcan syntax and idioms. Thank you for the prescience of recording my embarrassing outbursts." Skoln colored a deep emerald. "Whatever creatures are out there, this is their tongue, and they evidently want to be found." Spock rose. "I say we oblige them."

Finnegan sighed another of his ageless Gaelic sighs as he watched Spock stride to the door. Then he jumped to his feet.

"Just hold on a second!" the commodore sputtered. "You're supposed to be confined to quarters! You're supposed to be under arrest."

"So I recall," Spock said, leaning against the doorframe. "And you are commander of this base — unless it is dissolved under admiral Skoln's recommendation."

"And you can prove that stiff-necked, pointy-ea--scratch that," Finnegan said. "You can prove him wrong?"

"Perhaps," Spock said. "But if you persist in placing me in the brig or locking me in my cabin, I cannot even try."

Finnegan grinned. "You missed your calling, Mr. Spock. You should have been a lawyer. Even old Sam Cogley isn't as good at getting fish off the hook."

Spock left. Before he was gone, for an instant, the commodore could have sworn he saw a smile dart across the newly restored acting captain's face.

♦♦♦

The centurion groped his way out of the lab. He hated the labs almost as much as the crowd control center, where the blasts of rancid egg neural gas were spewed out to the detention chambers below, twice a day without pause or pity.

He had been one of the fortunate ones. When his father, by talent and treachery, had risen to the inglorious position of post commander, his first act had been to seek out his family in the druggy gloom of the colony pits. It was a Rihannsu's right, once in each generation, to reclaim one member of his halfbreed family to raise as one of his own. He had chosen the eldest child, the only son.

Pol remembered the heavy-lidded eyes of his mother, an original colonist who had come as a babe in arms with the first ship, one of the "Children of the Dream," as they had called themselves. She had been spared as breeding stock, and a toy for the amusement of the rihannsu conquerors, when the Great Reunion gathering had turned into the great Massacre nearly fifty cycles since.

And as a young centurion himself, his father had taken a fancy to her. That was how he dismissed the action now, when Pol had tried to question him: "a fancy." But in the slight quaver of his voice and the flare of his nostrils, Pol thought he detected a trace of mercy. So maybe my tainted blood isn't all from my mother. Maybe father isn't as ruthless, as totally Rihannsu, as he pretends. And whenever the youth had mentioned the others — his mother and sisters — his father had

coughed and changed the subject. But he witnessed his father-commander's furtive visits to the pits.

When Pol had asked his father why he did not bring them from the shafts into the sun, his father had coughed again, and said, "Orders are orders. The Praetor is the Praetor. I am only a subordinate to the Praetor, and you are only a subordinate to me, and subordinates do not ask such questions."

Twice a day, when the stench of the gas wafted faintly through the decrepit shields of the ventilating system, and torpor crept upon him, and the Rihannsu left their posts to robots to seek fresh air or sleep, duty and orders would not suffice as an answer to his questions. When the other young centurions, full-blooded Rihannsu, whispered as he passed, and the few Vulcans he encountered in his rare forays to the pits cringed, he knew with a sharp stinging recognition that duty was not sufficient justification for his existence. Not in his fellows' eyes, nor in the bovine, dulled eyes of his mother, nor in his own eyes.

He stopped for one last look into the lab. The intravenous feed was firmly in place, dripping steadily. Well, yellow-haired one, you shall eat whether you wish or not. Would that all our obligations were merciful as this one.

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"I still don't like this," Finnegan grumbled as he surveyed the empty screen.

"You don't have to like it, Commodore," Riley said sweetly at the science officer's station. "But you do have to go along with the decision. The surgeon general has certified Captain Spock fit for duty, and I accept his judgment." He turned back to his station and winked at Uhura. "At least now I can talk to him out in the open."

"Well, Boyce or no Boyce, I'm sticking close to him as a root in the ground," Finnegan said. "When Humans go awry, it's all out on the skin like tattoos. You can see it. A Vulcan's another matter."

"Thank you for your expert opinion," Riley said. He addressed his scanner, then flipped the intercom. "Riley to Spock. Comparison of data with log shows we're getting near to where you say your shuttlecraft went down."

"On the double," Spock's voice piped from the intercom.

"So what now?" Finnegan inquired, leaning chummily on the rail. "Smash another shuttlecraft? Send another suicide squad? Any volunteers?"

"Something damaged that shuttlecraft. Could have been emergency landing on a planet."

"Could have been a meteor. Running into a planet you don't see until the last minute seems like careless driving."

Spock, in captain's stripes, appeared behind Finnegan like the commodore's bad dream, and tapped him on the shoulder. Finnegan jumped.

"When the investigation is complete," the captain said, "you may bring whatever charges of careless driving, or indeed overtime parking you will. I have explained that we could not see the planet until we entered the range of gravitational pull and beneath the cloaking screen."

"That's one explanation. Flimsy, but an explanation," Finnegan said. "Why should I trust you when Admiral Skoln says to pull back and you've surely been acting odd?"

"Admiral Skoln is displaying fear — also aberrant behavior for a Vulcan," Spock said. "By your criteria of Vulcan normality, you are left with the choice of which madman to trust."

Finnegan sat on the rail. "I'll take the one who isn't trying to close down my base, thank you," he laughed.

"I knew you would listen to reason. First Officer Riley?"

"I've ordered her into orbit around where the planet ought to be, based on estimates of mass from the difference between what Lambda Psi Five's gravitation appears to be, and what it ought to be," Riley said. "Plus a generous margin for error. We haven't smashed into anything yet, so either we're orbiting a planet, or making a big pointless circle."

"Excellent," Spock said, and bent over Riley's intercom. "Bridge to Engineering."

"Scott here."

"Mr. Scott, we are ready to proceed when you are."

"I was ready hours ago," the engineer complained. "'Tis a simple enough task. But I warn you, Mr. Spock, keep your party small. I figure they didn't change the basic cloaking device, just beefed it up a wee. So I beefed our counter-device up considerably more. It's going to throw a lot of ions. It may muck up life-support a bit, and it'll definitely muck the subspace and the transporter for good and all."

"But we can still use it?" Spock said.

"Aye, two of you can. For one round-trip. Anyone else goes down at his own risk. I'm good, but I don't take chances with transporters."

"Very well, Mr. Scott. Watch the board. When I signal yellow alert, clear any decks where life support may be affected. When I go to red activate."

"I'll go down with you, sir," Riley said.

"You shall stay on the bridge," Spock said. Riley cursed Janice Rand for returning to the Avenger without him. Without the Fleet's foremost transporter expert, he was stuck on the ship for what might yet be the greatest adventure of his career.

Spock signaled yellow. Pulses speeded and tense silence held the helm, as Spock laboriously checked each deck for laggard crewmen and cleared them to safe quarters.

The lift hissed, and disgorged Boyce onto the bridge. "They've shut down my sickbay--I mean, the sickbay," he said. Then he obeyed the unofficial rule of quiet.

Spock pressed red alert. The constant hum of the mechanical hive in which they toiled became angrier. "Here it comes," Riley whispered.

All turned with eager, dreading eyes to the viewscreen. The tension hung pendant in the air.

Only a handful of stars lit the void.

"It must be there," Spock said. "I stood on it. I left my captain and the doctor on it. It almost killed Spock. It must be there, and there are living beings on it..."

"I'll take over now," Finnegan said. "Hard about. Deactivate that gadget. Let's pull out of orbit."

"No," Spock whispered, clutching the railing as if it were the only real object in a shadow world. "Wait. I know there is something there."

"D'ye doubt your own scanners? Look again, Spock. There is nothing there. I don't mean to hurt your feelings, but--"

A low grating sound, less than a growl and too angry for a purr, joined the buzz of machinery. Finnegan glanced at the lift support board reflexively, to see if Scott's jury-rigging had run amok.

Then he realized it was coming from the back of Spock's throat. Spock's fists tightened around the railing.

"I--am--a--Vulcan," he spat between heavy gasps. "I--"

His upper arms tensed.

"--have--"

The veins in his temple swelled to weave a thick net and reach down his suddenly muscular neck.

"--no--"

Spock's body became compact and powerful as an atom about to split, focused on the railing. Finnegan backed away. Boyce maneuvered to get behind Spock.

A squeal of metal joined the growl and hum in a dissonant fugue.

"--FEELINGS!"

Boyce ducked just in time. The railing section flew backward over Spock's head, and crashed into Riley's scanner, missing the startled crewman by millimeters.

The doctor lunged at Spock and got a grip on his waist. He darted a hand toward the kit on his belt, but he'd left it in Sickbay in the rush. Spock hooked a toe behind Boyce's ankle and brought him to the deck.

As Boyce rolled away from Spock and hauled himself up by the broken railing, he thought of McCoy, dead; of Kosciwicz, green and shaking; of M'Benga and Chapel, worn to shades by the constant vigil of supervising a crazed Vulcan. He hung over the rail on his belly.

"I'll tell you, Spock," he said quietly, "you sure are hard on medics." Then he summoned every remaining scrap of youthful strength in his withered hands, grasped the rail, and swung his wiry body beneath it.

His feet caught Spock in the ribcage with all the force of his momentum and his few pounds, and took him unawares. Spock careened into the back of the captain's chair, and fell.

"Goodness," Boyce said, "I hope I didn't break one of his ribs."

"I hope you did," Finnegan said. "Damned crazy overgrown leprechauns chasing pots of gold and lost colonies. Shut that gadget off, and let's move out..."

His voice trailed off as he followed Boyce's pointing finger. The commodore dropped in the chair, transfixed.

"Well, strike me—" he said.

A pale spherical halo was taking nebulous form on the viewscreen, stars still visible within the circle of empty space it defined. A hazy green glow gathered within the circle, burning fiery at first, then cooler, as shades of brown and blue mingled within it.

Finnegan blinked. When he dared to reopen his eyes, the pearl-and-opal image of a planet met him.

"There it is, just as you said," Riley said. "The pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Right where it ought to be."

Spock extended his arms toward the screen. He threw back his head and began to keen, rising above the cacophony in an alien obbligate of rage and grief. Boyce shepherded the crew to a safe distance.

None among the bridge crew spoke Vulcan, or Romulan, or any patois of either. But the pungent outrage of the shrill high notes and the pitiful pleading of the low murmurs made the song's meaning quite clear.

Spock broke off his dirge at last with a sighing coda of five low notes. He closed his eyes, then opened them again.

"What did that mean?" Finnegan said.

"I am not entirely familiar with the language," Spock said.

"I can guess," Riley said. "It sounds like, 'help'."

"Call Admiral Skoln," Spock said. "Tell him he shall accompany me. Let him see, and touch, and smell his 'myth,' and then doubt, if he can."

•••

Uhura's voice echoed through the Admiral's spartan guest quarters. "Admiral to the transporter room, please. To the transporter room, please." The interruption irritated him, insofar as he would permit himself to experience irritation. But he could not change the control setting, or the lieutenant would see the signal on her board and know he had heard her.

Let him go to his lost colony, Skoln thought. Let him see if he is pleased by what he finds. No doubt he will be very comfortable there, a half-savage among his own kind at last.

The admiral lay on his bunk, and permitted his eyes to assume the glaze of deep meditation. The lieutenant's voice grew distant, and finally faded out like the last gurgles of a drowning man. Skoln had succeeded in shutting out what he could not accommodate in his neat Vulcan consciousness.

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The prisoner looked up slowly, his eyes traveling with growing apprehension from boot to belt to blouse and at last to the commander's adamant face.

"The centurion has been relieved of your care," the commander said. "I shall handle your examination."

The commander bent low over him, letting the fringe of his braid brush the prisoner's upturned, expressionless face. At the same time, he caressed his disintegrator pistol.

"Come now, I know you talk," he said. "The night watch heard you moaning in your sleep. You may fool a simple centurion, but you are no cripple. You can speak."

He paused. The echo of his own words on the smooth walls answered him.

"If you have one word in you," he continued, "you may barter it for your life. You do not strike me as the kind who is eager to die." He straightened, and paced toward the glowing portal, hoping to be called back with that one word.

He stopped. No word was forthcoming. He made pretense of adjusting his belt, checking his weapon, and polishing his braid to buy time. All it gained him was more infuriating silence.

When bluffs fail, he thought, it is time either to pull out of the game...or raise the stakes. He half-turned back, and locked his gaze firmly with the Human's.

"No, you do not impress me as the kind who is eager to die," the commander said. "But then, of course, neither did the yellow-haired one."

The silent duel of stares continued for an eternity. Then the prisoner looked away.

The commander drew a sharp breath, barely daring to hope he had found the key to unlocking the prisoner's lips. Without lying outright, he had managed to mislead the Human. It was time for the final subtle maneuvers of the contest, and if he lost, he would have no choice but to make good on his threat to kill the prisoner.

The commander sauntered in a circle around the prisoner, pressing his advantage.

"He did not plead for his life, either," the commander said. "He was even more intractable than you, my silent friend. He refused to eat. But he spoke; oh, yes, he did speak."

The prisoner rose to one knee, mouth still tightly shut, but his eyes hurling sharp questions. The commander let the ricochet.

And now, the commander thought, it is time to lay down the final counters, and reckon my losses. He let his hand drop again to the pistol butt.

"He asked me to spare you," the commander said, truthfully.

The prisoner's head drooped as if he had been struck. The silence became as brittle as rime, destroyed by one breath.

"Jim," the prisoner whispered. "Oh, no, no. Jim."

The commander bounded to McCoy's side and dragged him to his feet. "'Jim,' eh? 'Jim,' What is this 'Jim'?"

McCoy hung limply in his arms, the last stubbornness beaten out of him. "You should know."

"I should," the commander said, casting the prisoner aside, "and I intend to." He reached for his communicator. "I want a search of all intelligence databanks pertaining to the Federation. Find me what is a 'Jim.'" He smiled at McCoy. "Not much to go on, true," he said, airily, "but more than we had, and, as I promised, enough to save your life. He said you were a doctor; you said he was a 'Jim.' We shall find out who you are."

McCoy backed up against the wall for support. "You — you mean you didn't know who we were?"

"Should I?" the commander asked. The he peered more closely at McCoy. "You speak as if I should."

"But I thought...the food, the ale...I thought you were treating me as if you knew I might be valuable," he blurted.

The commander's communicator whistled. He seized it.

"Databank central, analysis of 'Jim.' Several personnel at various command levels by that appellation, a variant of 'James'."

"Give me the most important one," the commander said.

"James T. Kirk, SC937-017CEC. Last known assignment, command of the starship Enterprise, NCC-1701. Last known contact with the Rihannsu empire: capture of the heavy cruiser War Cry and her experimental cloaking device, and capture of her commander. Previous contacts: destruction of bird-of-prey Sword of Conquest resulting in the death of all aboard--"

"Enough," he said. "Captain Kirk, eh? I had not hoped to encounter him in person. So if he is Kirk, you must be McCoy. Valuable, indeed."

McCoy no longer spoke. The expression on his face was eloquent.

"And if he is Kirk and you are McCoy..." The commander gloated no more as his churning mind sketched the third part of the triptych.

♦♦♦

How did I ever get myself roped into this? Finnegan thought. He tried to squinch his bulk flat against the wall, but knew he still protruded like a tumor. Even if I can get one of those helmets, no one is ever going to mistake me for one of those Roms, even in the dusk with a light behind me.

Soon after Scott had placed them outside the walls of the citadel, Finnegan and Spock split up, to the dismay of the commodore. He edged along the wall, glancing from side to side with each tiny step.

I don't belong here. I want my nice safe desk and my wet bar and my executive secretary. I failed my Kobayashi Maru, damn it, I don't have the stuff for going around laying my life on the line.

His tiny steps became quicker. He pulled away from the wall and broke into a run.

Maybe I'm not the bravest man who ever wore epaulets in this man's Fleet. Maybe I'll never win any medals, he thought. I didn't agree to come here to win medals.

Footfalls in the next corridor startled him into sobriety, and he jammed into a dark corner. Two Romulans passed without a glance at the overlarge shadow.

I came here for Jimmy, he thought, and proceeded down the corridor again. He may be an officious little twerp, but by God he's our officious little twerp, and no Rom is going to take from me the privilege of landing a good one on his jaw for this little escapade.

Another set of footfalls forced him into the corner.

Another Romulan, this one a centurion barely out of diapers, the commodore thought, and drew his phaser. The blouse and pants may be a tight fit, but the helmet is just what I need.

He lunged out of the shadow again, planted his legs wide apart, and leveled the phaser at the centurion's back.

♦♦♦

The Romulan commander glanced sullenly at the silent helmeted centurion guarding the door, and checked the monitors again. They lay inscrutably silent. Perhaps the Enterprise was already on its way to the colony.

He pressed a callused, battle-scarred hand to his head. Twenty-five cycles he had spent tending the Praetor's zoo, and he had been as humane a keeper as he could be under the circumstances. It had not been his idea, nor even his civilian father's, to chop off the out-stretched hand the small band of Vulcans had extended to him. By the time he had reached the colony, the Rihannsu homeworld knew it only as a dark legend of betrayal and bloodshed, twisted to extol the warrior glory of the Praetor and hint at the consequences of incurring his wrath.

Those consequences he had tasted himself, not two days after daring to marry the Praetor's youngest cousin. The match had not put him in line for succession to the Crown of Spikes or the Martial Seat, but that was not why he had done it.

The Praetor's wedding gift to a commoner, he thought. A hard cot on a barren ball of sand and fog, filled with the whining of whipped creatures and the rotten stink of nerve-deadeners in the vents.

At first, it had not been lonely, he thought. Then word came that the Praetor's silly cousin had taken a new husband, the provincial governor of one of the wealthier colonies. Then it was lonely again. And then not. And then, again lonely.

He remembered the courtier's command from the Praetor to throw his Vulcan wife back into the mineshafts. "One," the messenger had said, "and one only. Because you are far from the All-Ruler, do not believe he does not know."

He supposed it would end in a flash of antiseptic brightness, searing out every trace of the evil to which he had been an accomplice. If this Spock were wise, he would choose a photon torpedo, to dissolve every trace of the keep and its warders to pure and wholesome dust. Perhaps someday husbands could lead their wives without fear into the light, and children play in the fertile dust of his dissolved atoms.

Yes, if I were captain of the Enterprise, I would choose a photon torpedo. It may be the only thing ever to touch this planet that is clean.

Merely the last, and welcome, chapter in an ill-guided, unblessed humble soldier's career, he thought. May they blast us all to rubble. And may Pol and I, at least, die with a measure of the courage that has eluded us in our ignoble lives.

He opened the intercom. "Send in my personal guard. Page Centurion Pol." Then the timer sounded, and he mechanically pulled the control to begin the trickle of gas into the pits beneath his office. Might as well maintain protocol up to the end.

Another helmeted centurion entered. The commander barely glanced at them. "We are invaded. It is over, at last. We shall die as we lived — ingloriously and deservedly," he said in Rihannsu.

"Huh?" said the burly centurion. The Romulan commander looked up.

"You are not one of us," he said. "You are not of the Rihannsu, even though the uniform is—" his voice broke off as he read the nametag. "Kill me," he said in Rihannsu.

Finnegan drew his phaser and took off his helmet. He motioned the other centurion to stand across the room with the commander. "Hands over your heads now, and no sudden moves," he said. "I didn't reckon on it all being this easy. You fellows had your pants down for sure. But nothing gets past old Harry Finnegan's boy."

"Indeed," the other centurion said, in an all-too-familiar voice. "This helmet is hot. I shall remove it, if you promise not to shoot me."

"Oh," the commodore said. Spock removed the helmet.

"Are you from the Enterprise?" the commander asked. "Is it over at last?"

Spock looked into the middle distance. "We are from the Enterprise. As for anything being over, undoubtedly something has come to an end. But something may also be beginning. Turn off the gas."

"I cannot. They will riot. They will break out of the pits and tear us to pieces."

"If so, it will be as it must be. If not, that also will be as it must be. But it must end, now," Spock said gravely.

The Romulan commander reversed the control. The eggy odor seeping up through the cracked floor dissipated slowly, while Finnegan yawned and held his phaser and pistol at the commander's chest.

"Throw open the gates," Spock commanded.

"They will rip out the blocks with their bare hands," the commander said.

"They will bathe in my blood and paint their women's eyes with it."

"Perhaps," Spock said.

The commander reached for the latch control, then withdrew his hand. Spock activated it. The floor next to Finnegan buckled, shaking his lethargy out of him, and he flinched away from the opening.

Spock drew a deep breath. The eggy odor stung his nostrils and turned his stomach, but at last the tightness wound around his head was loosed for good.

accepted their loyalty and concern for each other as unspoken. More important, never to be spoke of. "Don't get mawkish on me," he said crossly. "I'm very much alive."

"That's the point," Kirk said. "No thanks to me. I gave up, Bones. I gave you up for dead. It was Spock who didn't give up. Spock came back for us, for you."

McCoy's voice took on a mocking metallic tang. "Sure. He was 'only ensuring that Starfleet's investment in two highly trained command-rank veteran officers was not lost.' He was 'only doing his duty.' That's why he came back for us."

Spock stepped into the room and stiffened to attention. "If that is what you wish to believe, Doctor, I shall not contradict you."

It is better that you believe that, Spock thought, then that you know the truth. For he, too, had given his comrades up for dead. The cry of the children, his distant blood kin, had blotted all other appeals from his consciousness. The children saved, he had not even stopped to search for their remains and pay them final honors, and in the end, their lives had hung upon the irrational compassion of those they had called enemies. He wanted either to feel sorry, as a Human, or dismiss it as unworthy of a Vulcan's dispassionate concern, and could do neither.

"Don't worry about it," McCoy told him coldly. "Not that I expect you to."

Spock waited a moment more, holding the mask of his alien persona firmly clapped to his face. Then, satisfied there would be no answers to his dilemmas, he left as abruptly as he had entered.

The doctor pushed the cold soup across the table to the captain once more. "Blasted computer," he said. "Jim, I really wish you'd eat. Now I'm getting upset."

"Because I'm off my feed a little?" Kirk said. "Come on, Bones."

McCoy dropped his voice to a hoarse whisper. "I ate. I drank. I collaborated with the enemy to save my own life. I thought--"

Kirk drew the soup bowl in front of his place. You thought I was dead, and Spock wasn't coming back. He lifted his spoon, took two delicate sips, then lifted the bowl to his lips and drained it in one delirious gulp.



Finnegan thrust the thumb of his left hand between the middle and ring fingers of his right, and raised both in front of him. It was not a proper Vulcan salute, but he could find no other way to do it.

"Ma'am," he said, bowing his head slightly and dipping on one knee. "I'd not anticipated finding myself in the role of defense attorney. I started this assignment as something between a prosecuting attorney and an avenging angel. but I'm here to ask for your mercy."

T'Pau inclined her head gravely. "We have this word in our tongue. Thee must justify thy request, for we also have the word 'justice'."

T'Shah threw back her veil and bowed stiffly from the waist. "My lady, we also have the word 'forgiveness.' Do not seek justice on the behalf of the Lost Colonists. We have forgiven. But we do ask you to dispense justice, for the children."

"What would you ask of us, sister T'Shah?"

Kyon stepped forward beside T'Shah and thrust his hand beneath the ancient woman's slippered foot. "T'Pau, the photon torpedo that destroyed our outpost has tapped a vein of radioactive ore. The emanations from the hole are spreading to permeate the surface of the planet. We cannot live there. We request permission to emigrate to Vulcan."

Skoln strode from the assembled courtiers behind T'Pau's litter, and stooped to push the Romulan supplicant roughly backward. "Your crimes are unforgivable. T'Pau, I beseech thee. Declare this man and all his people anathema."

T'Pau looked thoughtful, and slightly sad. "Mercy is strong within us. But mercy cannot change fact. That which has been done cannot be atoned for. You must not live among us."

The three peered into the shaft. They could make out dim shapes shifting at the foot of the staircase, but nobody ascended.

"They're afraid it's a trick," Finnegan suggested.

"Perhaps, after so many years, they fear the light," the commander said.

"I think not," Spock said.

At last, a veiled female climbed the stairs. "Forgive me," she said in Middle Vulcan as she accepted Spock's hand to negotiate the last step. "The occasion has been so rare that I have come up, or you come down."

She lifted her veil to reveal an ascetic, angular beauty marred only by her sallow complexion and a pained squint.

The commander reached to the control panel, heedless of Finnegan's waving pistol, and dimmed the light. He reached through the artificial dusk for her.

"T'Shah," he said.

"Kyon," she answered. "You look well. It has been many cycles, I believe, though I have lost all sense of time."

"Time has not touched you. You remain as you were when I brought you forth," he said.

"As I was," she said severely, "when you threw me back."

The commander drew his ceremonial sword. Finnegan thrust the pistol forward. But the commander laid the weapon at her feet.

"Through the heart," he said. "Such is your right."

T'Shah nudged the sword with her toe, then stooped to clasp the hilt. She presented it, blade down, to the commander. "I believe you dropped this, my lord," she said. "No brave soldier should be without his sword, any more than a husband should be without his wife."

Kyon gathered T'Shah into his arms, allowing the sword to clang to the floor again. She flinched slightly, then melted into him.

"You have disarmed me again," he said, "in more ways than one."

Three grubby heads poked up to the top of the shaft. "Behold the fruits of your conjugal visits," she said. "My dears, behold your father."

Three half-naked Vulcan-Romulan girls climbed out of the shaft. They attached themselves firmly to their mother's skirts. The young one, barely a toddler, surveyed her father with evident distrust.

"Hello, precious," Kyon said.

The child, with complete aplomb and no visible malice, bit her father on the thigh.

"Saavik!" T'Shah scolded. "She has been away too long from polite society. I despair of teaching her manners."

"Do not break her spirit," Kyon said. "It is what kept her alive. But do teach her not to bite."

The two figures merged again into one, and did not separate.

Finnegan nudged Spock. "D'ye get the feeling we're interrupting something?" he said, and tiptoed toward the portal.

♦♦♦

"Signal from Spock," Uhura said. "They're evacuating the pits. Everybody should be out in five minutes."

"Get it in yor sights," Scott said. "As soon as they're all out, we'll lob a photon torpedo right into dead center of that abomination, and sow the ground with salt for good measure."

Boyce hung back by the elevator, too dispirited to join in the rejoicing. So this was the grave Jim and Leonard would get for their loyal service and sacrifice: the gouged-out crater of a photon torpedo blast reducing their battered bodies to powder.

"I don't suppose we could take a last look down there," he said. "One more scan. An extra landing party."

"We can scan," Sulu said. "That cloaking device can be circumvented, but it can't be disregarded. We can't even be sure we're picking up all the living bodies

down there, much less—" he broke off abruptly.

Scott hung his head. He would save his grief for later, Boyce knew; it was a Scotsman's way, almost as much as a Vulcan's, to remain stoic.

♦♦♦

The crowd swarmed on the outskirts of the citadel. The flat black fortress squatted like a blemish, a cancerous growth on the sandy surface of the world. Finnegan imagined it would sprout pincers and legs, and slide crabwise forward to devour them all again. We got out of this one, he thought, but at what a cost.

He thought briefly of Jimmy. What a lousy way to go: six months left of a five-year run, and they get you on the way home. The Romulan commander hugged his Vulcan wife again. Finnegan's eyes burned through them to the gaping gate of the building beyond.

Alien slime, he thought. I hope you're enjoying the fresh air, because there's Humans that'll never breathe it in again, and all to save your green hides.

"Is that the last of them?" Spock asked the commander.

"We do not have an exact count," the commander answered distantly and held his wife so close Spock feared she would shatter. "As far as we know, there are no living Vulcans in the cellars, and all my men -- all my men who live -- are out." Goodbye, my son, he thought, and returned Finnegan's hot glare with his own bitter, accusatory gaze. I shall tell my wife later, when she is strong and we have established our new colony far from here. I shall return and make of it a shrine. And on his grave I shall place two offerings, Human. From T'Shah, a wreath of Eternal Blossoms; from my grieving heart, your head.

Spock opened his communicator. "Mr. Scott, the evacuation is complete. Begin countdown to fire photon torpedoes."

The commander caught Spock's last words. He released T'Shah.

"Torpedoes," he said. So many things had been on his mind, so many sudden shocks, so much habitual torpor from breathing the gas very day for cycle after cycle.

Photon torpedoes, he recalled. As I would use, if I were the commander of the Enterprise.

I am not the commander. Neither are any of these men. The commander is -- in there.

"Wait," he said. "You must not fire."

"The countdown has begun," Spock said.

"Are ye' nostalgic for that hellhole, then?" Finnegan jeered. "Trust me, you'll not be losing a thing when it's gone."

"But you will be! Something you value very much," he blurted.

"We cannot delay," Spock said. "We must move off."

"Listen to me," the commander shrieked. "The prisoners!"

"Prisoners?" Finnegan said. "We freed 'em."

The commander bolted toward the doomed prison. Perhaps this was his chance to die nobly, like a Rihannsu, at least; he did not believe he could save them.

Spock took after him on winged feet.

As the commander neared the door, a figure hurtled from the open gate into his arms. A limp intravenous tube still dangled from the captain's arm.

"How did you get out?" the commander said.

"It wasn't my idea," Kirk said. "Someone threw me at you."

"Allow me to borrow this excellent procedure," he said. He hefted Kirk's body in the air, turned to Spock, and screamed, "Catch!"

Spock reflexively caught. He flung Kirk over his shoulder in a fireman's carry, and seized the commander by the forearm.

"Time is short," Spock barked. "Run."

"Someone's alive in there," the commander said.

"Not for long, I fear," Spock said. "Cut your losses and run."

As the two ran, they could hear footfalls behind them. Ghosts, the commander thought madly, and redoubled his pace.

Spock passed Kirk to Finnegan like a runner's baton, and turned to watch the fireworks. He did not notice Finnegan's grin, half relief, half horror, until he spun to see its object.

Then he set out at redoubled pace toward the two figures straggling across the wasteland from the fort.

Pol, devoid of even a loincloth, feet blistering in a mass of angry green welts as he scrambled for a foothold in the shifting sand, hauled McCoy across the barren waste to safety.

Spock caught them both halfway. One arm around each waist, he encouraged their own faltering steps with his relentless stride, and dragged them when they fell at last.

As they drew near to the group, a soft thud echoed behind them. Spock plunged to the ground, thrusting his two charges beneath him, shielding his head with his hands and their bodies with his own.

The thud turned into a rumble, then into a "boom." The black fortress caved in upon itself, an earthbound black hole imploding, filling the sky with a tall plume of sand and smoke. The plume curled in upon itself again, and withered to a slender pillar of opaque, glittering fog. The pillar dwindled again, sinking into the earth, turning and returning upon itself, devouring the target and its own tenuous substance, until all that remained was an image etched on the commander's retina and a hot, luminous hole in the ground.

Spock raised his head. "Dr. McCoy, are you all right?"

"I'll be fine as soon as you get your knee out of my kidneys," McCoy said.

"You can speak?" the naked centurion said.

"Sure I can. Next you get to hear me howl in pain," he said.

The commander hurried to the side of his son. "Pol," he said.

Pol saluted. "I know I am out of uniform. That was due to circumstances beyond my control."

"Why did you not seek me out?" he said.

"I didn't want another demerit," the boy said.

"My child," Kyon said. "You shall never have another demerit, as long as you live."

Kirk filled his lungs with air that was blessedly free of breakfast odors. He coughed once, almost knocking Finnegan off balance. Then he threw his arms around Finnegan's neck and simpered, "Why, Ian, I didn't know you cared."

"Put me down, you overdressed moron!" Kirk then barked.

Finnegan hastily complied.

"Captain Kirk," the commodore said, "speakin' for Starfleet Command as officially designated senior officer of the quadrant, glad to see you're okay. Also speakin' as same, I hereby inform you you're under arrest, for reckless endangerment, negligent use and resulting damage to one shuttlecraft which I remind you is expensive, wrongful injury to the doctor here--"

"I'm not pressing charges," McCoy said. "I just want to go home."

"And that's another thing!" Finnegan said. "Unauthorized diversion from course without notifying the proper authorities. Not to mention--"

"Spare me, Ian," Kirk said.

"Commodore Finnegan, if you don't mind. And disrespect of superior officers, and--"

"Shut up," Kirk said. "And you can't get me for that, because you already listed it."

"Mister, you have put your foot in it this time," Finnegan said. "I'll have you know when this comes up before the Council, and it will, you'll be takin' full responsibility."

"I think so," Kirk said. "Yes, when it comes time for T'Pol to ask who saved all those captive Vulcans, I think I'd like to take full responsibility."

"Well," Finnegan said. "Yer can't deny I was here, Jimmy?"

Kirk sighed. "Yes, Ian, you're undeniable here, large as life and twice as ugly. I'll see you get a medal. A small medal. A very small medal."

The room was bathed in twilight, the door open.

"Come on, Jim," McCoy's voice coaxed within. "Eat something. Something easy to digest. Yogurt? Pudding? Soup?"

"Anything but eggs," Kirk said.

"Actually you should thank the Roms for dosing you with that gas. It slowed down your metabolism to the point where you needed almost no calories to keep going."

"I still wouldn't recommend it as a diet aid. And turn down those lights."

"If I put them any further down, you'll be sitting in the dark. Damn, but I wish you could take retinax. That'd clear up the dilation in a hurry."

"It isn't the dilation. I just want to sit quietly in the dark. And I'm not hungry."

"I understand," McCoy said. "What the Roms had going down there would depress anybody."

"That isn't it," Kirk said. McCoy pushed his plate of soup across the table. Kirk pushed it back.

"What to talk about it?" McCoy said.

Kirk sought the deep, trusting eyes of his old friend. Of all the people I know, you are the one I would least want to tell, and the one who should hear it, he thought. He shook his head.

"Then it's doubly important you tell me," McCoy persisted. "I'm talking as a friend and as a doctor, both. When the captain of a ship keeps important things bottled up and stewes over them--"

"We have less than six months to home port," Kirk said. "We're ninety percent over with it. It won't matter any more."

"Is that it? That you don't want to lose your command?"

"No. I don't, but that isn't what I'm thinking of."

"Don't play twenty questions."

"I mean you won't be responsible for my health much longer. It won't be your professional responsibility any more."

"Will it stop mattering to me as a friend?" McCoy said.

"Perhaps. Perhaps," Kirk said, "you would not be a friend any more." He gathered all his pride into one large bolus, the better to swallow. "I owe you an apology, if you'll accept it."

McCoy erupted in rueful laughter. "If I had a credit for all the apologies you owe me--"

"Shut up!" Kirk blurted. "This is nothing to laugh about." McCoy became sober and silent. "Oh, great," Kirk said. "Now I owe you two apologies."

"Start with the important one," McCoy said.

"Look. I know you and Spock, well, you've had your problems. I haven't tried to smooth out the rough spots between you two as much as I might have, or maybe I should have, because I always took it as a sort of creative tension. Or I shrugged it off as trivial, or maybe I even enjoyed it."

"My relationship with Spock," McCoy said, "is my own business, and his. If we don't actively hamper the running of the ship, it's not for you to get involved."

"But you don't understand. I — when Kyon separated us, in the prison — he wouldn't tell me what he did with you," Kirk said.

"Same here. I figured they'd gotten you, too, but I couldn't even get out to look for you."

"Kyon let it slip out that Scott was probably alive. And that Spock escaped. And that he didn't even know what ship was in the sector," Kirk said. McCoy nodded. "But you...he made you into a sword of Damocles and dangled you over my head."

"So what?" McCoy said. "Not the first time that trick's been pulled on any of us. Remember Khan, and my decompression chamber? Or--"

"Bones," Kirk said haltingly, "I thought he'd killed you."

The open anguish on Kirk's face caused McCoy to turn away. In all the missions they'd shared, he, and Kirk, and (he almost hated to admit it) Spock had

"You'll be trying to hog all the glory for yourself," Finnegan pouted. "That's your way."

"I'm surprised at you, Ian, giving up so easily. I'd've thought you'd at least want to paste a good one on me."

"Truth to tell, Jimmy, that I would. But you see, somethin' like that would put me in an awkward position, considerin' as how I just finished savin' yer life and all," Finnegan said.

Kirk's jaw dropped. He turned to Spock, who to his discomfiture confirmed Finnegan's statement with a gesture of concession.

"How revolting," Kirk muttered. "And here I was, getting ready to lay my best right cross on you."

"Go ahead," Finnegan said, and thrust his jaw forward. "Y'll never get a better shot."

"So you can bring another charge? Nothing doing." Kirk offered his open hand to shake.

"Why not? I stole your books."

"Academy was a long time ago, Ian."

"I stole your girl."

"Ruth was a long time ago, too. And I know she left you for an Andorian. Word travels fast in the officers' lounge."

Finnegan winced, then brightened. "While you were gone, I took over your ship."

Kirk landed the right cross he had been holding in abeyance.

Finnegan responded with a kick to Kirk's stomach.

McCoy moved to separate them. Spock held him back. "Perverse as it may seem," Spock said, "it would be a crime to separate them when they are both enjoying themselves so much."

Kyon watched with interest. "The Praetor would be much interested in these combat techniques," he said. "Do they have a name for this discipline?"

"Yes," McCoy said. "Dirty fightin'."

"To think of all the years we Rihannsu have spent fighting the Federation," Kyon ruminated, "when the Federation can evidently do so excellent a job of fighting itself."

"May we depart?" T'Shah said. "I am afraid Saavik is watching this with rather more interest than is healthy for a child of her temperament."

Spock took out his communicator. "Let us leave them to their diversions. The can beam up later, when they have had enough."

"I'd kinda like to see who wins," McCoy said wistfully.

"I predict a draw," Spock said, just before they dematerialized. As usual, he was correct.

♦♦♦

Spock paused at the door, his hand poised a centimeter from the signal. Inside, in the warm chiaroscuro of ship's dusk, he could hear Lieutenant Uhura's sweetly plangent voice singing an old Antarean lullaby.

He looked down at the lytherette in his hand. Perhaps she had no need of it after all.

"Thanks, Sparks," Spock heard Riley say. "If you won't come to the Avenger with me, at least you owe me a song for old times' sake."

"For more than that, mister," she said, and hummed low for another moment, toying with the melody as with a worn, beloved rosary. Then all sound in the cabin ceased.

Spock laid the lytherette gently by the door and crept away, with the last echoes of the song faintly lingering in his ears as he walked back down the hall.

I should not be plagued by such dilemmas, he thought. I must seek out my Human colleagues. They will explain and understand. They are accustomed to irrationality. They seem even, at times, to revel in such confusion.

He made his way to the officers' mess, and again stopped at the threshold.

She turned a heavy-lidded gaze on T'Shah next. "We cannot repudiate our own, who have suffered so. T'Shah, thee, and the others of the Lost Colony, may return to Vulcan, and we welcome thee."

T'Shah bent over Kyon's humbled, huddled form. "My Lady," she said softly, "please understand I mean no disrespect. But fully a quarter of us have taken spouses from among the rihannsu. If thee cannot welcome them, thee cannot welcome us."

"Would thee choose to live on a barren world, wed to thy jailer?"

"If Kyon is not there, then Vulcan is a barren world. I thank you again for your offer."

"So be it," Skoln said. "We are better off without the renegades."

"Her choice is her choice," T'Pau said. "What can be done?"

"And the children?" T'Shah said.

Skoln waved at Kyon and T'Shah as if their pleas were gnats buzzing around his head. "The children especially must not come here," he said. "They will contaminate the breeding stock. They are not true Vulcans. No Vulcan would indulge in such a shameless lack of self-control, sending blatantly emotional thought-messages across the galaxy -- to total strangers. The Vulcan way is endurance of misfortune, not indulging in temper tantrums."

"Is it a temper tantrum to cry out when one is in pain?" T'Shah said.

Finnegan came eye-to-eye with Skoln, close enough to bite his nose, and for a moment the big Irishman considered it. "See here, you mechanical man," he said. "This isn't the first time Vulcans have been in this sector. I've seen traders, explorers, science teams. Hundreds of your people have passed though here in the past year alone, and many of 'em have passed closer than the Enterprise when Spock began picking up those messages. Are you trying to tell me that of all those Vulcans, you who like to consider yourself the ultimate in evolution, not a one of you could hear children crying?"

"We cultivate our mental discipline specifically to screen us from such unseemly outbursts," Skoln said. "And even if one had heard, it would have been bad form to acknowledge it."

Spock approached the litter. "T'Pau, I wish to raise my voice also on behalf of the children."

"That," Skoln said, "hardly surprises me."

Spock pretended to ignore Skoln. "I trust that, far from polluting Vulcan, these children would enrich us. They are hardy and intelligent. The strategy by which they summoned me bespeaks ingenuity, logic, and a will to survive. They are--"

"They are savages," Skoln interrupted. "They are halfbreeds. We can only hope, for their own sake, that they are infertile, as so many halfbreeds are."

The whites of Spock's eyes showed. He reached down to T'Shah's skirt and gently detached a tiny fist from the fabric. The little hand lost in his own huge palm, he led the child to T'Pau's litter.

"This is a child," he said. T'Pau nodded as if he had said something profound. Spock led the toddler to Skoln, who dared not recoil in T'Pau's presence.

"What threat would a child such as this pose to Vulcan?" Spock said.

The girl tilted her head straight up, and slowly lowered it, taking in the entire enormity of Skoln. Then, dispassionately, she kicked him in the left shin.

"Saavik!" T'Shah said.

"I fear she takes after me," Kyon said.

Skoln rubbed his shin. "She displays the temperament of a halfbreed."

"Indeed," Spock said. His eyebrows joined in an angry arrow pointing down toward tight-drawn lips. Riley, on the sidelines, instinctively looked around for breakable objects to move.

"She is a child," Spock repeated. "She can be trained. She is as capable of learning proper Vulcan manners as anyone else -- even you, Skoln."

"We cannot take that risk," T'Pau said. "Imagine a hundred children like this

one."

"Not a hundred then," Spock answered. "One. Let this child, at least, remain. Let a Rihannsu-Vulcan be raised by a Vulcan family, and if the experiment is successful, in twenty years, allow the colonists and their Rihannsu spouses to walk among us as citizens."

Kyon and T'Shah looked at each other. "It will mean a better life for her," Kyon said quietly. "Spock, if T'Shah agrees, you may take our child, along with our hopes."

T'Shah rose, took Saavik's other hand in hers, and placed it in Spock's other hand. Saavik drew her hands away, and studied him intently. Then she threw her arms around his leg, and would not let go, not even when Spock began to walk back to his place before the litter. She hopped onto his foot and rode.

T'Pau watched Spock hobble with his burden, "I trust, Skoln, thee will agree to this experiment, if only to prove Spock wrong."

"In twenty years, it will no longer be important who is right or wrong," Kyon said bitterly. "We shall all be dead of radiation poisoning."

"I don't think so," Riley said. "I can think of a grand little place for you." He polished his restored commander's stripes with his knuckles. "Babbling brooks, rolling hills, open space, fresh air. Class M. And a crying need for colonists."

Finnegan's eyes lit up.

"I'll have your citizenship papers for Lambda Psi IV drawn up and stamped before you can finish packing," he said.

"I doubt that," Kyon smiled. "We have nothing to pack."

Pol came forward and helped his father to his feet. "So. It is still not resolved."

"Everything seems resolved to my satisfaction," Kyon said.

"Not to mine," the young soldier fretted. "I had hoped you would tell me." He turned to T'Pau. "My lady, I have one more issue for your wisdom to decide."

"Speak, young one," T'Pau said.

"Am I Rihannsu—or am I Vulcan? The Rihannsu will not take me back. I am a traitor. The Vulcans will not take me. What am I?"



"Thee are..." She raised a majestic hand. "Thee are not Rihannsu." She clenched a fist in the Praetor's salute, and opened it. "Nor are thee Vulcan." She parted her fingers to show two in the ancient Vulcan greeting. "Thee are the son of thy father and mother. Both, and neither." She extended her pinky and index fingers delicately to either side, the two center fingers together, in an inversion of the Vulcan gesture, and drew her thumb into her palm, an acknowledgment of the clenched fist. "This shall be thy sign, and they people's. Both, and neither. And among the Vulcans, from this time forth to all tomorrows, thee shall be known as Haraya," T'Pau said.

T'Shah took her husband's hand. "What does that mean?" Kyon whispered.

"They who return to heal," T'Shah replied. "The Humans have a word for it. I believe it is 'messiah'."

T'Pau lowered her hand with a quick chop, ordered the gong to be struck.





With the Tongues of Men and Angels

Chapel held the knife above her target, measured the incision with an expert eye, and looked to Kirk to cue her cut. "A little to the right," he said. "Not quite so large, please. I'm on a diet."

She brought the knife down through the frosting, careful to give him the largest pink candy rosette, flipped the slice onto the plate, and handed it to the captain. Her own smile reflected the childlike radiance on Kirk's face.

"Any excuse for a party," she said. "Really, it isn't that important."

"I beg to differ, lass," Scott said, and sank the ladle once again into the punchbowl.

"Anyway," McCoy said, "we've gone to all the trouble of setting this up, so why don't you enjoy it? Finish opening your presents."

Kirk handed her a small rectangular parcel. "What he means is, open his present."

Chapel tore off the bright paper and flung it away, and held the wooden slat by its hooks, gazing as if it were her firstborn baby.

"I know it isn't much to look at," McCoy said.

"It's beautiful, Doctor. It's everything. 'Christine Chapel, M.D.'"

McCoy chewed his lip. "Just don't get any ideas about handing it here. We've already got a doctor in the house. But once I pack up, then I can't think of any shingle I'd like to see hanging in place of mine, more than this one. Congratulations, Christine."

She ran her hand over the rough wood. "This is handcarved, isn't it? Wherever did you find someone to--" Sly, affectionate comprehension crept into her eyes. "Why, Doctor. So that's how you got all those cuts and burns on your hands last week. Acid, my foot. Really, stick to carving up patients from now on."

"See, Jim?" McCoy said, spreading his hands in mock disgust. "Give 'em a sheepskin, and see how uppity they get. One more crack like that and it's bedpan duty for the next two weeks."

"Now, Bones. Don't be so hard on the lady."

"Don't worry about it, Captain," Chapel said, handing McCoy another plate of cake. "I know him as well as you. He's just a big pecan pie, aren't you, Bones?" McCoy spluttered. She patted his cheek. "Once you get under all that crust, it's all sweet and sticky inside."

Kirk busied himself with refilling cups amid the laughter and handshaking. Once the last ladleful had been dipped, he whistled for attention, and announced, "Ladies and gentlemen, I propose a toast. To Doctor Chapel. The, ah, second-best medic in all the Fleet."

"The prettiest," McCoy said. "I'll concede that."

"The newest, anyway," Chapel said, and raised her glass. She clinked it in turn against each upraised glass: Kirk, McCoy, Scott, Chekov, Uhura, Sulu, and M'Benga.

Kirk gulped the contents, and rolled his eyes. "Now I know why they call it 'punch,'" he said. "Whoo-ee. Bones, what did you put in this?"

"I didn't put anything in this," McCoy said. "It is the duty of any good medic to know an effective recipe for homemade anaesthetic. This is part of her apprenticeship. I pass her with flying colors." He poured the liquid down his gullet in one long, lazy guzzle.

"Well, then," Kirk said, "I guess it's time to get back to duty." He beckoned to his officers.

"You hardly just got here," she said. "I'm sure we can--"

Kirk exchanged quick, dark looks with McCoy. "I think," the captain said in carefully measured tones, "that everyone who is coming is here." He kissed her on both cheeks, deferentially. "Anyone who missed the festivities, well, you mustn't take it personally. Chalk it up to that person's bad judgment, Doctor."

"Nurse," please," she said. "I signed on as a nurse, and I'll leave as one. Like the doctor said, there's room for only one shingle on this wall right now." She turned away. "All this fuss for a silly piece of paper."

"Christine," Kirk said, putting more into the single word than he could have put into a thousand excuses, apologies, circumlocutions and lies.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Won't you stay for one more glass of punch?"

"One more glass of punch," Scott intoned, "and we're liable to forget where the bridge is."

Kirk headed to the door, with Scott, Sulu, Uhura, Chekov, and, after a discreet nod, M'Benga falling in step behind him. "I'll be up in a bit, Jim," McCoy said.

Chapel sat dispiritedly among her pile of presents, barely acknowledging McCoy's continued presence. When he pulled up a chair beside her, she glared as if he had no right to remain in his own office.

"You knew he wasn't coming," she accused him. "You all knew. I have never been so humiliated in my entire life."

"He's been through a shock, Christine," McCoy pleaded. "The Vulcan and the Human in him have been slugging it out, and he's still not sure who's winning."

"He was on duty this morning. He was on landing party and emigration processing duty all day yesterday," she said.

"Those aren't stressful. He thrives on work, you know that. But something like this is highly stressful."

She laughed bitterly. "It figures. Anyone who tries so hard to have no feelings isn't going to worry about hurting mine."

"He did worry. That's why he didn't come, and frankly that's why I'm here," McCoy said. "For a woman who professes to love him--who's even had him hanging around in your consciousness when he got stuck outside his own body--" he paused. "And boy, that's one job I'm glad you got instead of me. For a woman who knows so much about this man, I'm amazed you can understand so little." He rolled his words in his mouth awkwardly, as if he were trying to spit out a bone in his craw.

"I'm not much for Bible-thumping," he said. "But my father was a preacher type, and he whaled a few lines of the Good Book into me. There are some very admirable people out there, Christine. As the Book puts it, they can speak with the tongues of men and angels, and know all things and work wonders and move mountains. We have a first officer who kind of fits that description." He shrugged.

"But where he comes from--" McCoy swallowed the bone. "Where he comes from, they don't have 'love.' They have something else that keeps the species going."

"He's half Human," she said doggedly.

"Not necessarily that half, though," McCoy said. He waited, and mumbled at last, "He suspects he's bonded."

His words hit her like a kick in the stomach. McCoy let the rest of the horror story spill out in a low, intense monotone, fighting anger; not anger at Spock, but at blind chance.

"Don't ask me just yet who. And as for how, I'm not sure anyone understands, even them. He doesn't want to be. I don't think she wants it either, considering she nearly got him killed. But she might go along out of sheer orneriness, for all I know. It's up to them."

"Will he--marry her, Len?"

"Not if I can help it. I mean, that remains to be seen," McCoy said. "But whatever happens, the fact remains that you've been chasing this swamp gas for five years. And now, somebody else may have waltzed in and gotten what you wanted for herself, whether either of them want it or not, through plain old bad luck."

Chapel began to sob tearlessly. "It isn't fair. It isn't."

"No, it isn't. But the fact it could have happened that way tells you what your chances were from the start, doesn't it?" She lay her head on the table, and tears began to flow at last. He retreated behind a barricade of irascibility. "Well, don't sit there getting soggy. That won't solve anything. And stop looking at me as if it were my fault, dammit!"

She lifted her head from her twined arms. "I wasn't looking at you at all," she said. "Is it your fault?"

He sighed. "Christine, I am sitting here like Helen in the middle of the Trojan War. I didn't start it, and I'm not fighting in it, but it happened around me, and I guess it wouldn't have happened without me. In more ways than one." He took her hand. "And I am truly sorry to have to be the one to tell you, but he wouldn't have told you himself."

Her hand stiffened under his, and pulled away. She raised angry, dry eyes to his, and turned them from him to the desktop.

Then, with one sweep of her arm, she sent the quaint assortment of antiquities the other crew members had given her flying and crashing to the floor.

The vitrine display case Sulu had hand-blown for her cracked at the base, spilling a hydroponically cultured mandrake root on the floor in a puddle of preservative solution.

The hand-tooled hinges of the velvet box Chekov had brought all the way from Earth, and which had been in his family since the time of his famous ancestor, himself a doctor and playwright, broke on impact. Silver scalpels, forceps and clamps that had been in his family since the time of the Tsars clattered on the floor.

Crack! went the brightly figured Juju sceptre that had served healers in Uhura's family when Humans had not even known the lights in the sky were not pinholes in the black cloak of a great earthbound god.

The stethoscope and mirrored headband Scott had hammered from spare parts joined the rest of the mementos in a pile at her feet, followed by the tiny scale-model skeleton M'Benga had lovingly carved for her. McCoy dived for the skeleton, too late, and saw it shatter into a heap of ivory splinters.

He thought for a moment of the huge, gentle dark hands darting through the intricate web of ribs, and the warm, pleased look on the man's love-lit face. Sure, he thought, go ahead and break someone's heart because someone else broke yours. It occurred to him how wise Spock was to steer clear of Humans' fierce and unforgiving love.

The shingle joined the pile, split down the middle. The only thing left now on the desk was the battered black frontier doctor's satchel embossed with the name Herbert A. Kirk, M.D. Chapel seized it in both hands and flung that to the floor as well.

The satchel bounced, flopped on its side, and disgorged a small brown box, devoid of wrapping or tinsel. McCoy picked it up and handed it to her. "If you're quite finished," he said. "The party isn't over yet, as I would have told you if you'd given me a chance."

Chapel opened the box. Inside, wrapped in tissue, was a small caduceus, of

some warmly glistening green-gold metal she had never seen before, and a scroll.

The essay inscribed on the scroll, in Spock's cramped, angular printing, informed her that the caduceus "is an example of halushai, an ancient Vulcan discipline practiced by the ascetics of Mount Seleya and their disciples. Many excellent examples of halushai may be seen in the Vulcan Academy of Science anthropological and philosophical collection, dating back to 40,000 Earth years before the time of Surak."

Turning the staff over in her hands, she could see that it was not, as it first appeared, solid. She consulted the scroll again. "The halushai is crafted of a wire of pure thanium, prized among the ancient Vulcans for its luster. Highly malleable in its ore form, it must be worked within six hours of smelting, for once its temperature cools below 150 degrees centigrade, gases that lend it its flexibility evaporate, and it becomes impossible even for a phaser beam to cut it. Thus, the artisan of halushai must work with a single minded purpose, skill, speed and precision, for an error cannot be repaired, and the halushai must be perfect."

She looked from the artifact to the scroll and back. "What is this," she said, "Vulcan Archeology 101?"

"Finish reading it before you pick nits," McCoy said. "Please, put aside your anger for a moment, Christine."

She unrolled the paper further. It explained in great, and exact detail, the strict regulations the Vulcan masters had imposed on the creation of a halushai. Noah had been given more latitude on the size of the Ark; if the thanium wire was so much as a fraction of a micron too thick, or wide, or uneven anywhere along its 1,000 kosh-- "equivalent to 1,453.862 Standard meters," the scroll explained in one of two dozen footnotes--it would be rejected as imperfect.

"Before weaving," she read aloud, "the halushai is inscribed along the entire length of the ribbon with words of power. This is roughly equivalent to your Earth soldiers carrying holy books into battle, or rosaries, prayer books, and amulets which are worn or nailed upon doorposts." It cited two dozen reference sources on comparative religion, which she skipped over, unrolling another three inches of scroll.

"Your words of power, as a physician, begin with the Hippocratic Oath, which is inscribed on the halushai both in Standard--" she broke off. "He wrote on it? On the wire?"

McCoy nodded. "You can even read it, under the microscope," he said.

She continued to read the scroll instead. "--in Standard, and in the original Greek. Also the Declaration of Principles of the Medical Fraternity of Axanar; the charter of the Vulcan Academy medical school; the Sacred Incantation of the Kanutu caste of Neural; the investiture ritual of the Medicine Chiefs of Atalanta VII--"

There were at least forty more spells, creeds and oaths of which she had never heard, each meticulously footnoted. "He should get the diploma, not me," she said.

"Christine, please," McCoy said.

"Since the wire must be inscribed form end to end, and these were not enough to fill it," the essay continued, "the remained 238 kosh have been inscribed with the names of the most revered physicians of the galaxy, those whose names are rightly spoken with admiration and gratitude, and whom you should strive to emulate in your new position. The list begins with the mythical Aesculepius and the aforementioned Hippocrates, and the Roman Galen, and continuing solely with Earth-born persons up through Salk, Semmelweis, Ehrlich, Barnard and Father Damien. It then interweaves figures from interplanetary history, including Li Chin, Wezler, Korshak, Chal, and T'ronu, concluding 123.5 kosh later with my mark after the final name, Leonard McCoy."

"Now hold on!" he said, and grabbed the scroll from her hands. "He didn't tell me that was going in there."

They raced each other to the microscope. On the head of one serpent, clearly visible in the same fussy handprinting as the scroll, were the words, "First, do no harm." The inscription vanished into the convolutions of the ornament. She shifted it under the lens, to focus on the second serpent's tail, where in the same

print they could see with equal clarity the familiar name, and a tiny IDIC symbol to punctuate it, like a kiss or a tear.

"Son of a--" McCoy said. "That sneak. Just when you think you can get good and mad at him, he goes and does something like that."

"Shall I finish reading?" Chapel said. She raised the scroll again.

"I, Spock, child of Sarek, of the house of Skon, certify that this halushai conforms in every detail of conception, substance, design and execution to the prescriptions of the Master Smelters as they were handed down from the time of the beginning, to my generation and to all generations to come; that no hand save mine created it, and that it is perfect." An intricate hieroglyph dotted the bottom of the sheet.

"Spock's name, I guess," she said. She laid the scroll and the staff on the desk, and sadly nudged the remnants of the other gifts with her toe.

"I'm sorry," she said at last.

"I'm sorry you weren't in Engineering to watch him make it," McCoy said. "His hands were just blurs. By the time you thought you saw them move somewhere, they'd been three other places. Didn't know anyone could move that fast. We were all just stunned."

"We?"

"Sure. You need at least six witnesses to certify a halushai. We all had to troop down there in the middle of the night and watch him."

"But, Doctor, he told me outright he had nothing he could give me--that he can't love me like a Human. So why--I don't understand..."

"If you think about it, if you're still in the habit of thinking with anything except your glands, you'd understand. He's giving you what he can. Only you can know if it's enough."

"I think I understand," she said. "I know what Spock is trying to tell me." She picked up the halushai again. "It's certainly a wonder, isn't it?"

"Yes, he said. "It is."

He's giving me the only love a Vulcan can give, she thought. He's offering me what a Vulcan values most. Perfect precision, perfect order, the elegance and simplicity of equations. A Human would give me candy or flowers and kiss me. He's caressing me with science, kissing me with logic.

She loved him no less to realize that she did not want to be kissed with logic, but with lips. "Len," she sighed, "Why don't you get to the bridge? I'll bet Captain Kirk is asking for you. Oh, and once you get up there, please send Dr. M'Benga down. I...I need him here."





Fear in a Handful of Dust

The station endured. Abandoned long ago by Starfleet, and perhaps also by whatever gods governed these vast voids beyond the cultivated regions of a more fertile galaxy, the station ground on. Gears failed to mesh perfectly, raising a thin, whining protest as gears stripped and ground. Shards of lithium fell from wheezing conveyor belts to the circuits of the machinery.

The station lay where once no man had gone, and then had gone but once, and finding nothing of special value, had turned back. Mindlessly performing its obsolete function, the machine continued its programmed obedience even as the essence continued.

A hot whistling wind raced through the empty chambers, dancing around the broken chairs. Soft screams joined the basso chug of hammers and the feeble hum of draining lasers.

No Starfleet soldier had set foot on the terrain for nearly five Earth years. No sound of a living creature had disturbed the decay.

Then dawned the fifth day of the second season of the seventh year of the planet so forsaken by Starfleet (and perhaps by the gods, if they had ever deigned to visit) that whatever name it had once had was long ago forgotten.

On that day, a sharp sizzle, a quiet gush of melting stone, far from the station, raised an inhuman cry. Pianissimo at first, the sound rose to rival the voices of the gods, summoning them to care about this world they had forgotten.

The sound was soft and slow in the beginning, a lullaby-in-reverse, awakening the power of the world without a name. The stone slowly melted, forming two red-hot lava puddles like malevolent eyes on the surface presented to the thin atmosphere and the uncaring stars.

The change took time, but time and decay were the only known realities on the planet without a name.

On the eighth day of the third season of the seventh year of the nameless place, life came again, manifesting a power perhaps as terrible as the gods who had, in their folly, forsaken the world.

A boulder shuddered, as if with some premonition.

The two tiny coins of molten rock on the surface erupted. Slender twin beams of swirling silver energy shot from the glowing white-hot holes and plunged deep into space.

Then rock itself catapulted into the air, as easily as a pebble from a slingshot. The rock exploded into fiery fragments as it hit the upper atmosphere.

Another projectile followed. The slab burned and cracked in the air, and fell back in a long accelerating arc into the roof of the lithium cracking station. The

building exploded, tossing the largest fragment of slab back to the one who had hurled it.

The new god of the planet caught the slab. He read the inscription with an unchanging smile on his fleshless skull mirroring the gleeful malice in his brainless consciousness. Clasp ing it in bony fingers, he began the laborious task of building himself a body.

The task took time, and will, but time and will were all he had to repair the decay wrought on him by his imprisonment on the nameless world. Out of energy and pure will, he wove sinews of lithium, and filled his veins with pulsing energy from the crystals that had been his tomb. He draped himself in a glowing skin of energy.

Then the new god melted a crystalline mountain, and in the pool of rock he beheld his reflection. The form was his old body glorified, and he was pleased.

He raised the broken slab to the skies, as if his nemesis could read the name written on it.

"I told you, Jim," he said. "I told you you should have killed me while you still had the chance."

And he flung the slab into the skies.

•••

The yellow light blinked above Kirk's door. He tried to ignore it and poured himself another shot. Exotic trans-galactic libations might be fine when he was bending the elbow with friends, but if he was going to do some serious drinking alone, he'd go to scotch straight up.

The light continued to blink stubbornly. He flipped on the intercom. "Go away."

"It's time for your shot," McCoy's voice answered.

Kirk shoved the glass under his bunk. "Come back later."

"You're an hour behind schedule already. Come on, take your medicine like a good captain."

Kirk deactivated the lock. McCoy entered.

"You realize," Kirk said, "that you are invading my privacy?"

"It's my business to be a snoop," McCoy said. He sniffed the air. "And it seems to be your business to waste my time. Dammit, now, you know I can't give your shot until your blood alcohol level goes down."

Kirk carefully retrieved the glass from under the bed. "I prefer this kind of shot to your kind, Doctor," he said and downed the balance of the liquor in one swallow. He wheezed slightly; it was stronger than he'd expected. He recalled once, as a cadet, having challenged Finnegan to a drinking bout, and downing fifteen such jolts in a row before the upperclassman had even poured his sixth.

Kirk lifted the decanter, and offered it to McCoy. McCoy waved it away. "I know scotch isn't your style," Kirk apologized. "Let me whip you up something more suitable."

"What would be suitable, Captain Kirk, is your not circumventing my prescriptions," McCoy said irritably.

"I'm a big boy now," Kirk said.

"Sometimes a little too big for your britches, as we used to say," McCoy said. He relieved Kirk of the glass and decanter.

"I'm the captain here," Kirk said. "At least for a little while longer, I am the captain."

"And I am still Chief Medical Officer," McCoy said. "And I'm still the one deciding whether or not you are competent at any given moment to remain captain, Captain."

Kirk smiled widely, showing all his teeth, his eyes glittering with scotch and defensive adrenalin. "Now, Bones, you wouldn't pull physician's privilege on me."

"If you insist on behaving like a six-year-old, I may have to," McCoy said sharply. "I'll expect to see you in Sickbay in the morning. Oh six hundred sharp. And absolutely stone cold sober." Kirk turned moist doggy eyes on him, and he

softened only as much as he thought consistent with his office. "Jim," he sighed. "It's because I am your friend that I'm talking as your doctor. Your power on this ship is supreme, almost—but you're only human, and it isn't absolute.

"Oh six hundred, and not a second later," McCoy said, and let himself out again, glass in one hand and flask in the other.

♦♦♦

Spock stepped out onto the patio. The soles of his feet sizzled against the baking stones under Vulcan's relentless sun and breezeless scarlet skies. It is hotter than I recall, he thought. I have spent too much time in other climates, among other races.

His parents joined him. Sarek greeted him with a traditional salute and a stiff bow from the waist. Amanda allowed her Human nature to peep through, brushing his cheek with a kiss, which drew a cough of embarrassment from her strictly Vulcan spouse.

"Come now, Sarek," she told him. "There's no one else here to see us."

"I am thinking of my son's delicacy," Sarek said. "There is a strict etiquette of personal contact, even for parents and children — as I thought I should no longer have to remind you, after all these years." He turned to Spock. "We are always pleased to see you. We hope in time you shall return, and remain."

"You haven't brought any more strays home for us to feed, have you?" Amanda laughed. "We have only one guest room left."

"I promise I shall impose no more on your hospitality, my lady."

"Not that we really mind," Amanda said. "Commander Hatfield has been a delight. At last, someone to talk to!" Sarek fixed a stern glare on her. "I mean — well, you know what I mean. And the little girl!"

"The little girl," Sarek said, "must learn to behave. Spock, yours would seem to be the only voice she will heed. Please inform her that I do not appreciate being bitten."

"It's almost like having another child," Amanda said. "Like having a grandchild."

It was Spock's turn to let loose a sheepish cough.

"My son, I have received a proposal from the Vulcan Academy of Science that may interest you," Sarek said. "I have been notified that with the death of your venerable cousin S'Thal, the hereditary seat assigned to the house of Skon is now vacant."

"I grieve with thee," Spock answered ritually.

"Ten generations of our house have occupied that seat," Sarek said. "It is time for the next generation to assume the mantle. S'Thal was my contemporary; we were of an age. Thus, I am not eligible."

"You could request an exception," Spock said. "I am sure the ruling elders would grant it, in the absence of an acceptable successor of the coming generation."

He could not pull his eyes from Sarek's. The two locked gazes in a dignified, passionless battle.

"A decision is expected at the end of two revolutions," Sarek said. "Twelve Earth days. At that time, the Enterprise shall be returning for you—and your five-year commission expires. A great many things can be decided on that day," Sarek said. He nodded to Amanda and Spock, and took a formal leave.

"He isn't angry with you," Amanda said.

"He is incapable of anger," Spock said. "Alas, I am your child as well as his, and I cannot say the same."

"If you decide to stand up to him," Amanda said, "I'll support you. Go to the Academy if you wish, but don't let him bully you. Taking that seat would be a great honor, but — it wasn't necessarily what I wanted for you."

"And what do you want for me, Mother?" Spock said.

"Happiness," she said. "We'll discuss this later, shall we? In private?"

♦♦♦

It was not until the first day of the fourth season of the seventh year that the shining being abandoned the nameless planet of which, briefly, he had made himself god.

Under one prodigious, phosphorescent arm, he tucked the last fragment of the tombstone he had intended to crown his foe, and which had pressed upon his own remains for so long. He extended the other massive arm above his head, a divining rod to seek out the one whose name he had caved on the stone.

It turned the roiling pits of his eyes on the ground beneath his feet. Far below that planet's fragile crust, his gaze delved, and pulsed energy into the unstable crystalline core of the nameless world.

The planet seemed to name itself with a series of evil hisses, as molecules shifted and split with a rage as full of unfettered strength as that of its lifeless but animate god.

The thing that had one been Lieutenant Commander Gary Mitchell, first officer of the U.S.S. Enterprise, flexed silvered legs in a graceful plie as the planet stirred. He shot into space, rupturing the dusty scum of soil over the crystal strata and unleashing the power that had once provided whatever little value the planet held for gods or men.

Behind him, as he plunged though the atmosphere and into the void, the world that had briefly had wealth, and a god, and perhaps in some ancient time even a name—

--for many things that once were known have been forgotten, and may yet be known again--

That world had not even an existence.

The shining self-molded god of the world that had been and was not knew that he existed. The ones who had tried to exterminate him also continued to exist. They would try again to destroy him. He would make sure they did not succeed.

♦♦♦

The ceramic bowl floated daintily across the room and hovered just beneath Spock's restlessly drumming fingers like a faithful puppy. He removed the smallest piece of fruit and began peeling off the rind in neat parallel strips.

"Pretty good, huh?" Hatfield said. "Just a parlor trick, of course. But I could even go to bed and make it stay there all night. Or take a day trip to ShiKahr."

"Complete control of small objects," Spock said, "is definitely an improvement. I am, however, more concerned with your control of one large object. Yourself."

"Well, I'm never going to be a Vulcan," she said.

"I am pleased to understand that," Spock said. "I would appreciate your making that fact clear to certain other persons of our mutual acquaintance."

Hatfield's eyes twinkled slyly. "She's been working on you, too?"

Spock concentrated on delicately removing the integuments and arranging them in precise geometrical symmetry along the rim of the bowl.

Hatfield shook with suppressed laughter. "You don't have a thing to worry about, Spock. I'm not a candidate to settle down. I have first-hand knowledge of mismatches and unhappy couples. I have no desire to be 'bonded' to you, thanks."

Spock interrupted his careful arrangement of pips to raise his eyebrows at her. "You are perhaps not aware of it," he said, "but the intimacy of our mind-meld was far greater than that required to bind me to my first wife, and under far more intense circumstances as well. Such a bond as we formed could be severed only by an equally intense trauma -- say, the Koon-ut-Kali-fe."

"Maybe so, if I were a Vulcan," Hatfield insisted. "But I'm not. And there's something even more important, Mr. Spock."

Spock closed his eyes. He felt as if he were crumbling to dust under her scrutiny.

"Mr. Spock," she said, "you are not Human."

He made no answer, but neither did he continue eating. Far from the sense of

relief he had expected, he was puzzled. So, he thought, I have been cast off by a Vulcan wife, and rejected by a Human as well. Too human for the one, and too Vulcan for the other.

Hatfield watched him depart, a frown crinkling her brow. She wished she had had as much success controlling her telepathy as her telekinesis. She had no desire to know what Spock was thinking. Then she beckoned, and the bowl drifted lazily across the room to float by the arm of her chair.

•••

This would have been the third day of the fourth season of the seventh year of the nameless planet, if that planet had still existed. But Kirk could not know that.

He knew that Vulcan was three light days away, it was the middle of the night, and for some reason the air in his cabin was close.

He kicked off the bedclothes, rolled onto his stomach, and rubbed his eyes. One hand thrashed out for the climate controls.

Another hand, glowing, cut through the darkness and pinned Kirk's wrist to the nightstand.

Brimstone seared Kirk's lungs as he gasped. It's like inhaling lava, he thought. What beast's belly have I been swallowed into...?

He flipped onto his back wrenching his elbow as the silvery hand gripped his wrist tighter.

This is the very devil of a dream, he thought. Whatever Bones put in that hypo—

The entire cabin seemed to bubble and sizzle, melting around him into charcoal and ash. The luminous figure bathed in the heat, a pillar of Greek fire in his newly-created Hades.

"Hello, Jim," the glittering god said. "It's been a while."

"Gary," Kirk said. "Go back where you came from."

The godling shook his massive head. "You haven't changed a bit, Jim. But I have."

"Gary," Kirk whispered, "you aren't real. You aren't alive."

"No, not alive, not in the sense you think of living. But I am real, Jim. I'm very real." And he gave Kirk's wrist another wrench, spilling him out onto the floor still tangled in his sheets.

"You're dead, you're not here. You're not really here. We left you millions of light-days away. You're not here," Kirk chanted, hoping the groggy incantation would work a miracle and Mitchell would disappear.

The silver god laughed softly. "Still afraid of me? Still harboring ill-will? But I'm benevolent, Jim." His other hand reached out to take Kirk by the throat, and lift the captain like a broken toy. "I haven't come to kill you. You didn't understand. I didn't have the power to make you understand. But now I do. And if you're the man I think you are, you will understand."

"There's nothing to understand," Kirk gasped. "Go away."

"But I can give it to you, Jim. I can give you your heart's desire. I can give you what a starship captain, a leader of men, wants. What you want."

Mitchell's eyes locked with Kirk's with a crackle that lit the room. Kirk became translucent, a thing of smoke and shadow as Mitchell's power bored through his memories, his deepest fears and desires, burrowing through to his soul.

"I knew it," Mitchell murmured. "I'll make you understand, Jim. I can set you free again."

Mitchell's words seemed to solidify and bounce against the side of Kirk's head. The apparition might as well have stood behind a glass wall, he seemed so distant. The wrestling match within Kirk's head became a battle.

Get back where you belong, he heard himself cry. I met you once before and overcame you. Maybe I don't need you, but I control you.

You? he answered himself. Without me, you couldn't pilot a kiddy-skimmer on Wrigley's Pleasure Planet. You're right. You need me to command. But the

difference is--

Half of Kirk's consciousness collapsed down to the soles of his boots and did not rise. Half rose to the top of his skull, a yeasty exultation that almost threatened to burst his skull and explode unchecked throughout the room -- the ship --

I don't need you. Kirk's better self, gentle to the end, yielded.

Mitchell released Kirk's throat.

Kirk did not fall. Borne aloft by sheer will, he hovered, eye to eye with Mitchell, an inch above the floor.

Mitchell watched with lordly approval as Kirk's slack lips twisted into a sneer, and the brows drew into a sardonic imperial scowl. "Yes," Mitchell said. "Exactly as in your recollections of that transporter foul-up. Of course, that was after my time. But you really ought to guard your mental images more carefully. They're very vivid. Almost a blueprint," he said.

Kirk -- or half of Kirk, and perhaps all that still existed of Kirk -- smiled. He closed his eyes. When he reopened them, they swirled and burned with goulsh luminescence.

"The crowning touch," Mitchell said. "Just what, in your heart of hearts, you've always wanted. Command, and all that it implies. Power."

"Yes," he said. "I do command. I'm the captain of this ship. Forever, Starfleet or no Starfleet. I can do anything I want."

"Enjoy it, Jim."

"Not 'Jim'," the captain said. "Tiberius."

•••

Spock contemplated what little landscape he could see from the terrace adjoining the Great Hall. The desert, in stark monochrome of scarlet, beckoned like a lover.

My father would have me be Vulcan. My mother would have me be Human. Both turn to me, as if the choice were in my hands.

Far across the arid plain, a dark pinprick against the setting sun, Mount Seleya pointed accusingly at a sky so audacious as to contain Sol and its troublesome satellite, Earth. Solid, immutable and stoic as the Vulcan race itself, the peak had stood untouched by passing eons, and would, Spock knew, endure long after his own petty conflicts had worn him away to nothing.

The ceramic fruit bowl hurtled up over the balustrade and across the patio, stopping an inch short of his nose, tantalizing. A citrus fruit began a slow striptease, peeling into perfectly symmetrical strips, segments arranged with elegantly mathematical precision into an equilateral triangle.

"I'm learning fast," her voice giggled behind him in the hall, "aren't I, Mr. Spock?"

He turned, his face a mask of control. "These are childish games."

"I don't apologize," she said, "but you are right. I didn't come to play games." She advanced to the railing and leaned out, looking over the desert. She was speaking to Spock, but to him it seemed she was looking with a painful clarity at something else, something no less real simply because he could not see it.

"Understand me, Mr. Spock," she said, "you think I'm a silly Human female, and I've come to talk about 'us' and what's between us. Maybe so, but not in the sense you think. Because in that sense, there is nothing between us," she said.

"Then there is nothing to talk about, Commander."

She pressed her palms against her temples as if to contain the pounding nightmares. "I didn't say there was nothing between us. Merely that it isn't that. This is something much more important. And it's in danger, but nobody knows it yet."

She turned to him, and took his hand. "You have to go back to the Enterprise. For the sake of everything either of us ever cared about, you have to go."

"The Enterprise will be here in two days," Spock said. "I am inclined to think you are more concerned with seeing me go, than with anything that you may

imagine is happening--"

"Two days! We can't wait two days. We don't have two days. And if that ship gets to Vulcan, something terrible...Spock, if you don't care about a shipful of Humans, at least care about a planetful of Vulcans!"

"I cannot care now. I have been under strain. I need time to heal."

She leaned over the railing again, bending so deep into the empty air that Spock feared she would pitch over to the stone steps below. "You could hear an entire ship of Vulcans die. You heard two hundred of your own people crying. But you won't hear your friends." Hatfield hung her head. "Well, don't worry about your mother, Mr. Icecube. Because I'll tell her myself I wouldn't have you if everyone else in the entire universe was dead."

Spock nearly mistook her last murmur for the whipping of the sand against the stone as the duststorms of the Vulcan sunset raced across the plain, carrying the end of day.

"An' they just may wind up that way."

Spock stayed awake with her all night as she kept watch at the open window, too fearful to cry and even more fearful beneath because she could not be certain what she feared.

•••

McCoy double-locked the doors of his cabin. The shift had been uneventful, except for Scott failing to show up for his daily anti-radiation booster. After a quarter-century of intimacy with engines, he had developed a certain degree of immunity anyway, and daily boosters were of less concern for him than for the ensigns and technicians. He probably mixes antimatter with his scotch and sprinkles dilithium on his cornflakes. He would surely show up in the afternoon, hungover and repentant.

"Time check," he snapped at the computer.

"Oh-two-thirty," it chirped.

Time for all good little boys and girls to be in bed. He thought for a moment and shook his head. Jim has all the luck in that department. But that doesn't mean I can't still enjoy having the rest of the wee hours to myself.

He took a book down from the shelf over his bed, plopped into his favorite battered chair and smoothed the yellowing pages. Reading off the computer screens hurt his eyes, and allowing the computer to read aloud to him made him feel two years old. A real book was a primitive relic perhaps, but a reassuring talisman whose passive availability gave him a welcome sense of control.

His index finger hovered by the wet bar a moment, then moved on to the next button. You need a clear head for Flannery O'Connor, he thought, and programmed himself a glass of warm milk and two oatmeal cookies.

He had reached page seven when the yellow light above his door blinked. He slapped the book shut, and flicked on the intercom. "Yes?"

"It's your captain," the intercom rasped. "Let me in."

McCoy swiveled his chair to present its back to the door. Probably on his way back from some yeoman's cabin again and wants to hang his trophy on my wall. There's been a little too much of that lately, and maybe I've been encouraging it too much.

He held his answer until he figured Kirk would wonder what was wrong. "Jim, at this hour you ought to be in bed, alone. And this is my time off duty. See you in the morning."

McCoy reached for the intercom switch, but before he could flip it off, the voice rasped again. "I want to see you now. Open the door."

"But I don't want to see you," McCoy said. "I'm off duty. You promised me--"

"Let me in, McCoy. That's an order." The touch of menace in his voice piqued McCoy even further.

"On what basis, Captain?" he asked. "No yellow alert. No red alert. Not even a code 5A. You're the only thing on board that isn't quiet. I said no. Not unless there's a bona-fide emergency."

"I'm the captain," Kirk said. "I command here." The intercom fell silent for

a second, and McCoy reached for it again, but drew back when Kirk's voice hissed a last time, "And I can enter in spite of that 'no'."

A chill ran down McCoy's spine. He's in a nasty mood tonight. Wonder if she threw him out?

He flipped off the intercom. He'll apologize in the morning. First to her, whoever she is, then to me. He always does.

He jumped in his chair. The voice continued to pierce the cabin through the intercom. "As for an emergency, that could be arranged."

McCoy reopened the book on his lap and tried to find his place in "A Good Man Is Hard To Find." The words slipped under his unfocused eyes like so many hieroglyphics. Am I more tired than I thought? I can't concentrate. It's too hot in here.

He reached over for his glass of milk, which had begun to bubble and crust over. He dropped the glass, and thrust his scalded fingers in his mouth.

Forming next to the puddle of milk on the floor was a silver runnel of another bubbling liquid. He followed it with his eyes around the side of his chair, and swiveled to see the source.

The pedestal of the chair melted and ran, and he found his feet before it dissolved entirely to merge with the molten metal stream snaking across the floor. The book in his hands crumbled to hot dust.

Kirk, with an imperious wave of his hand, cooled the metal into a silver amoeba on the floor. He stood in the ragged hole of the melted doorway. "Enough of an emergency for you, McCoy?" he said.

"Jim," McCoy said, "what the hell happened to your eyes?"

"Not 'Jim'," Kirk said. "Tiberius, if you please. Captain, in case you'd forgotten." He advanced into the room. "And if you think that was an emergency, wait until you see what I'm going to do to you next."

♦♦♦

The weight of Sarek's shoulder had fallen awkwardly on Amanda's arm, sending unpleasant tingling sensations up to her shoulder blades. With a genteel snort, she shook herself half-awake and disengaged her arm.

As she massaged blood back into the stiff limb, she chanced to glimpse two figures on the balcony, standing close, close as she had recalled once standing on other balconies on a far-distant green and lovely world. She smiled dreamily and turned over. Everything was proceeding as she had hoped it might.

Hatfield's face hung pale and disembodied in the lantern light on the balcony, a miniature moon in Vulcan's moonless night. She did not start at the touch of Spock's hand on her arm.

"Come away," he said. "All the others are asleep."

"So much the better," she said. "They'll never miss me."

"Nothing unusual escapes a Vulcan's notice. My parents will see that you were not in your bed. They will think you are ill."

"That's not what you're afraid they'll think, and you know it," she snapped. "There's something wrong out there. I can feel it. And you say you can't, but I know you can tell, too."

"The night air whips up duststorms," Spock said. "If you remain longer, I predict severe respiratory distress. If there were something amiss, it would not be helped by—"

A jolt shook her body. Spock's fingers tightened on her arm.

"There! Didn't you hear it?"

When Spock loosened his grip, crimson patches charted the spots where his fingers had been. They turned an angry blue.

"Here what?" Spock said evenly. "I heard nothing."

"Like fish, you didn't," Hatfield said. "It takes more than 'nothing' to startle a Vulcan so he nearly breaks your arm."

He bowed his head. "My sincere apologies for your injuries."

"Forget my injuries," she railed. "You're worried about a couple of little

black-and-blue marks on my lily-white arm? Someone out there just screamed. Maybe you're telling the truth. You didn't hear it. You didn't let yourself hear it. But--"

"But what I may have perceived by other means is an entirely different question," he conceded. "I perceived your strong reaction."

Hatfield began to shake again, as if with palsy. "Spock...my god. I know you have reason to think I'm not the most stable individual." She held out her hands. He clasped them. "Maybe you can't explain this with your chop-logic games yet. Or at all. But I dare you to deny it's real."

The next jolt was so powerful it threw them backwards, hurling them to arms' length until it seemed their limbs would tear off in the sockets, but their palms kept tightly welded together as the quake passed from her to him. They collapsed together again, each needing the other's teetering body as a crutch.

"Go," she whispered. "Whatever it is, get it off that ship. Don't let it get to Vulcan."

"Tonight," Spock said. They braced for the next impact.

•••

The god was pleased to have, at last, a world with a name. Here, secluded and enthroned, he could drink in all the energy and power on which he thrived. He could trust his faithful and grateful servant, his emperor Tiberius, to attend to mundane affairs while he built a reserve of power.

Kirk amused Mitchell beyond the entity's most extravagant dreams of his years of torpid boredom on the nameless world. Although Mitchell had the raw malice required to fuel the dictatorship, Kirk had the imagination and the experience of command, as well as a knowledge of the crew which made his whims truly inventive and his barbs well-aimed.

Kirk, of course, was handicapped by that annoying benevolence of his that had kept him from being another Garth of Tzar. He hoped to snuff the angel in Kirk without killing the beast who made such an excellent pet and ringmaster in his Human zoo. Killing him, at best; at worst, unleashing a Kirk-demon beyond even Mitchell's power to control.

He cracked off another morsel to crunch in his iridescent teeth. Soon the Enterprise would be orbiting an inhabited planet. Then he would not need the ship any more, and he could forestall any threat to his own supremacy by obliterating his creation. That in itself could be an entertaining diversion.

•••

Uhura struggled and tore at the gilded choker. The gemstones bit into her throat.

"Too tight," Kirk said. "Let me loosen it."

The choker obligingly fell off entirely. The lieutenant stretched her neck like an injured swan, and raised her hand hesitantly to her throat.

"No bruises," Kirk said. "No blood. Don't worry. I want you unmarred, Lieutenant." He tapped lightly with his toe on the small of her back, a tap that fell on Uhura with piledriver force.

"If you like, I can relieve you of the rest of the apparel," Kirk said. "I never did care much for Orion dancing girls, anyway. Garish."

He smiled, and the glittering beads draping Uhura's prone form metamorphosed into the shimmering, not-quite-opaque gossamer folds of a temple priestess of Regula VI. "Much more becoming, and rather more demure. I wouldn't want to corrupt the lady by showing him anything he isn't supposed to see."

Uhura opened her mouth, but the angry words she had prepared to fling in his face came out as delicate bird-chirps.

"What's the matter, Lieutenant?" Kirk-Tiberius smirked. "You seem to be having trouble communicating." He conjured himself another drink without resolving to the wet bar.

"Cheers," he said. "To the fulfillment of heart's desire. To getting what

you've never admitted to yourself, even in your darkest dreams, that you've wanted. And I have wanted her, all this time..." He raised his glass in a mocking toast. "But of course, you guessed that, didn't you, Chekov?"

He drained his glass, without awaiting an answer that he knew would not be forthcoming, and bent over the lieutenant. "Later, my dear," he said.

•••

The cockpit door stuck. Hatfield tugged it half-ajar, and sized up Spock critically. "If you scrunch, you can get in," she said. "But this thing's on its last legs. Don't count on bringing it back."

"I shall only require its services for one surface-to-space trip," Spock said. "Maximum speed?" He checked the control panel. "Primitive."

"My granddaddy said never to trust a machine you can't take apart and put together with your bare hands," Hatfield said. "I can strip this skimmer in five minutes flat, and rebuild it in seven, though there's always a couple of bolts left over that I don't know what to do with."

"Your mechanical aptitude is clearly hereditary," Spock said, "as is your peculiar brand of logic. Still, this will have to do."

"I wouldn't risk using the subspace either," Hatfield said. She touched Spock's brow. "But I still want you to keep in touch."

He reciprocated the gesture. "I shall think of you often."

She offered her clasped hands to give him a leg up into the craft. He planted the sole of one boot firmly in her hands, and pushed off, landing unceremoniously across the bucket seat.

"It's designed for me," she said. "The fit may be tight."

"It will suffice," he replied.

She thrust her hand in the door to prevent him from pulling it closed.

"Mr. Spock, one more thing."

"Time is slipping away. I estimate the ship will enter orbit in three hours. Make your comments with alacrity, please."

"Mr. Spock, damn it," she said, "I'm trying to wish you luck."

He spared a precious moment to consider the prospect. "I accept your wishes, more for your sake than my own. Considering my method of transportation, I may have need of it."

She slammed the door shut on his finger.

•••

On the day that would have been the tenth day of the fourth season of the seventh year of the nameless world, a moon appeared in Vulcan's moonless sky.

The most learned astronomers of the Vulcan Academy of Science consulted their maps and charts, but to no avail. The venerable devotees of the Kolinahr at Gol disturbed their rituals of intellectual exaltation and emotional self-negation to glance at the skies and exchange questioning looks. The most serene and honorable Vulcan Ambassador to Terra, Sarek, and his Human wife surveyed the phenomenon from the presumed safety of their home.

The glowing object in the sky volunteered an explanation when Central Interstellar Communications in ShiKahr received the subspace call. James Tiberius Kirk, commander of the U.S.S. Enterprise, assured the Vulcans that the unusual luminous aura around his ship was merely the result of a new and extremely powerful energy source aboard the ship. He respectfully requested permission to assume standard orbit, and at some future point, when "my work up here is completed," he would be pleased to acquaint the entire population with the nature and uses of this energy.

The Vulcan elders granted permission routinely, and the glowing object in the sky ceased to be even a novelty.

The esteemed faculty of the Academy returned to their labs and computers. The ascetics of the mountain returned to their meditation and quest for the perfectly elegant equation that hid the meaning of life.

Sarek and Amanda turned their attention to worries nearer to home. Their houseguest, Commander Hatfield, would not leave the balcony even for meals or sleep. Blasted by windstorms and seared by merciless midday sun, she kept her eyes fixed on the horizon, waiting for the rise of the anomalous moon.

•••

The glowing pseudo-moon loomed huge and impregnable before Spock's tiny craft. He berated himself, with utter dispassionate clam, for allowing Hatfield's Human urgency to hurry him. He had not yet managed to devise a plan for getting on board.

The illogic of any lack of foresight, he thought, though surely worthy of reprimand, is hardly germane to the situation as it stands. It is more important now to preserve my life long enough to be able to ask these questions later.

He recalled the time Kirk had broken up another interminable quarrel between himself and McCoy. With Spock making a case for dispassionate logic, and McCoy loudly defending the cause of intuition, Kirk had stepped between them with a "Sssh!" and explained that "Intuition is frequently what we call logic moving too fast for the eye to see."

Very well, then. He would trust his intuition.

He focused on the image of the ship, reduced to miniature on the viewscreen in the cramped cabin. Shields down. He touched the communications panel, and the subspace let out a single "blip."

To his surprise, the Enterprise did not react by blasting him out of the sky. Nothing living answered, but his subspace radio receiver fluttered to life. Uhura was evidently away from her board. The autocoder rapped out a request for further information.

The little skimmer (grandiosely christened the Savannah Queen) had no preprogrammed identification code to send back. As far as the Enterprise's computers were concerned, she was a negligible bit of motorized scrap. And if I do not send some kind of response, the computer will tag me a menace to navigation, and dispose of me, he thought.

Spock knew the ship's autocoder recognized 2,357 different Federation access codes. He had never had occasion to memorize any of them.

Not deliberately, that is. Before he could think about what he was doing, his fingers tapped out a code he had broadcast to apparently empty skies thousands of times before, in one desperate grasp at life, so long ago he rarely thought of the incident at all.

But the signal code remained engraved on his fingertips, and tapped itself out as automatically as the autocoder itself.

The Enterprise computer paused, digesting the series of beeps from the Savannah Queen, then responded in a melodic mechanical voice. Spock had rarely heard a more welcome female invitation.

"Enterprise to shuttlecraft Galileo 7. Hangar door opening. Prepare to board."

Spock began to reprimand himself for neglecting to purge the obsolete code from the computer banks. Then his intuition told his logic to forgive himself this one transgression.

The doors of the hangar deck gaped wide, and Spock jockeyed the craft between the nacelles, calculating entry at a 45-degree angle.

Impulse power, warp 0.2. Steady as she goes... The starship's autocoder, still responding to the false code, obligingly fed the skimmer complete coordinates for every maneuver. Spock reconfirmed the Galileo ID with another series of crisp keystrokes. We Vulcans may be incapable of lying, he thought, but we are not above allowing a machine to do our deceiving for us.

Steady as she goes...

Red and yellow lights began to flash on the Savannah Queen's control panels. The board sounded an indignant squawk. He might have succeeded in fooling the computer for a time, but the automatic backups had run a routine verification check against the log tapes, and turned up the nonexistence of a shuttlecraft named

Galileo 7.

Spock groped for the override, and found a joystick by his right knee. He siezed the stick with one hand and kicked in the boosters with the other. He recalled more than a simple computer code form the fiasco of the Galileo 7.

There are situations when desperation is the only logical response, he thought, and twisted the stick.

The boosters hummed steadily in a whining crescendo. Warp 0.5, warp 0.7--

The hangar doors were closing like a carnivorous plant on the delicate dragonfly of a skimmer. The Savannah Queen, built for leisurely cruising around lazily spinning moons in the galaxy's slower sectors, vibrated wildy with a frantic hum as if the machine itself could panic.

Spock set the pilot on automatic, and groped with his free hand to connect the oxygen tubes to his life support suit.

Warp 0.9--

The glowing doors narrowed the orifice to a dark slit in the rear hull of the ship, a slender target of at most 15 meters. Spock calculated the Savannah Queen's wingspan to be 20.5 meters. He jerked the joystick straight toward his chest, nearly impaling himself.

The craft's graceful wings swooped and tacked ninety degrees, and slid through the doors on its side.

Made it, he thought as the stars disappeared behind him.

He had not even taken a relieved breath before the screech of ripping metal tore at his ears, followed by silence and airlessness like a freezing sledgehammer against the life-support suit. The right aileron of the craft had caught on the sill of the hangar deck airlock, and was ripped from the body as easily as the wings of a butterfly.

The impact of sudden vacuum slammed Spock out of the cockpit and to the deck with bulletlike force. Artificial gravity pinned him to the deck, with the wreckage barely a handspan away. A bit more, and it would have landed on my head, he thought with incongruous clam. There is something to be said for dumb luck.

He twitched each muscle in turn. He could not lift his limbs, but satisfied himself he had landed in one piece.

Spock fixed his eyes on a nondescript point on the ceiling, and induced a glassy-eyed meditative stare. He could soothe his abused body by ignoring it, and slow his breathing to extend the limited air in the life-support suit, by calculating to the Nth decimal place the value of Pi. In a few minutes, the airlock control circuits would automatically return the life-support systems to normal.

He broke off at the 3467th decimal place. And once that happens, what do I do next?

•••

Lethargic in his unchallenged omnipotence, Mitchell lazily crafted himself a crown from a hunk of raw, solidified energy. He had dwindled alarmingly in both size and power on his journey to seek out the Enterprise, but after several hours of glutting himself on the nourishment the ship could provide, he was beginning to bloat back up to the intimidating dimensions of the shell he had built on the nameless world.

He extended his arms and admired the subtle contrasts of his sleek, silvered muscles with the dull gray of his chosen throne room. Kirk watched with hungry and envious eyes.

Mitchell chuckled, his throaty rasp echoing the death of the nameless world.

"I'll make you a little diadem of your own, if it's really that important to you."

"I'm the commander of this ship," Kirk pouted.

"If I must. But a prince's, not a ruler's, yet." He broke off another chunk of mineral and rolled it in his fingers to make a circlet, which he tossed across the vast expanse of the room.

Mitchell ignored Kirk, and spoke softly to the air and himself. "A hand well

played," he said. "You had thought to kill me, Spock. We shall see who kills whom. You haven't changed much, but I have."

"Spock?" Kirk said. For a moment, compassion and concern wrenched control of the muscles of his face.

Mitchell frowned. Tiberius is powerful, but Jim is more powerful than I had suspected. He reached into Kirk's depths again, dredging up as much of the buried essence of Tiberius from the muck as he could, and set it upon Jim.

Kirk's inner conflict did not last long. Mitchell knew the effort would be fleeting and pitiful at best. Tiberius would always triumph over Jim, he supposed; Jim's scruples and innate softness made him adverse to combat, especially with a force so repugnant to his essence as the ruthlessness of a Tiberius.

The mask hardened over Kirk's features again, and his eyes, too briefly hazel, glittered. "However did he get back here? Is he on board?"

"I let him aboard," Mitchell said, "just barely. It doesn't serve my purpose to crush him where he stands. Why mollify myself with the vengeance of an instant," he drawled, "when I can have the agony of a lifetime? If I've taught you anything, it ought to be that."

"Yes," Kirk said, "it's better to leave them alive. What good is my having a ship if I don't have any servants to rule?" He leaned on a sign reading, "Danger--Keep Out--No Humans Beyond This Point."

Mitchell coolly cocked his head. "Would you like to attend to Spock personally? You know him better than I do, though one taste of him was quite enough for me to know he's got to go, or he'll get rid of us. And he is the one who would be captain, if you fall."

"Leave him to me," Kirk said. "I know his weak point. I know his heart's desire." He grinned, showing more and sharper teeth than Mitchell recollected human beings possessing. "Did you arrange for him to come here?"

"Strangely enough, no," Mitchell said. "That was his own idea, which I would never have expected. But it may prove to be his undoing. Of all the things to motivate a Vulcan! Love. Love brought him here."

Mitchell laughed his metallic laugh again. Kirk joined him, a brassy bark with a fluttering note of uneasiness. Mitchell did not notice the flicker of hazel in his eyes.

•••

The captain never did explain to me what "Trick or Treat" is, Spock thought. I have the distinct impression it must be akin to this.

He crept in a cautious half-crouch through the dim and barren corridors. The lower decks were deserted, although automated functions eerily continued a mechanical vigil, awaiting the return of crewmen who were nowhere to be found. Computers piped routine signals that no Human ears were present to interpret. Automated mess bays proffered cups of hot coffee to absent sentinels at precise twenty-minute intervals, and in niches in each wall, cold untouched cups sat, milk curdling on the top and unopened packets of sweetener heaped beside them.

If the crew had beamed down to the surface, surely his parents, as the ambassadors charged with acting as the buffer between Vulcans and bumptious Humans, would have been called at once. Perhaps they had been; after all, more than five standard hours had passed since he launched the little craft, and transporting was instantaneous.

Or they could even have beamed down covertly, without warning the Vulcan authorities of their plans. That would be tantamount to an invasion, and suicidal to boot. Vulcan had never, in its entire history of unnumbered eons, been successfully invaded.

Not in recorded history. As for the future, he could not make logical predictions without more data.

The ship somnambulently continued the maddening hum of artificial life around him, seeming to wait suspended between abandonment and normality. Spock waited also, making his way slowly, expecting at any second to slip into one realm or the

other and uneasy at remaining poised between the two.

I shall have to force events, he thought. Logic had left the Enterprise, but he had no other tool at hand to apply to the problem. Logically he would have to find the captain. Again, logically, the most likely spot for the captain to be was on the bridge.

The bridge, with no corridors and only one turbolift for ingress and egress, was also the most logical place for the captain, or whatever was now running the ship, to mousetrap him.

•••

Logical to the end, Mitchell thought as he watched Spock slink toward the turbolift. Shall I make it easy for him...? Why not? With a whim, he returned the lift to operation, and sent it to the lowest deck -- after delaying it via several detours. Let him think he summoned it, Mitchell thought.

Spock's exterior had changed, Mitchell noted. The fiery Human and the stern authoritative Vulcan no longer took turns controlling his features. They had blended somewhat, etching their traces in his face as slowly as advancing years and growing responsibilities had etched lines around his eyes and creases at the corners of his thin lips. Outside, he has changed a little; inside, he is not much different where it counts. Mitchell knew Spock was not aware yet of his presence on the ship, but could feel the Human side of Spock, and knew that part of him carried a buried loathing of his former comrade-in-arms, locked in the deepest recesses of his memory like a dusty keepsake.

Mitchell pulled out the keepsake and dusted it, dashing into Spock's psyche in a hit-and-run operation.

"So," Spock breathed, barely aloud. It was now more vital than ever that he find Kirk, before the Mitchell-creature did.

Mitchell redoubled his focus on Kirk. He had been able to slacken his control on Kirk's personality, and allow Tiberius, Kirk's dark and power-hungry self, to assume the task of keeping Jim's better impulses in check. Tiberius was even more powerful than Mitchell had anticipated; he supposed anyone who would agree to take the lives of more than 400 souls in his two hands, and send them hurtling through the void at five times the speed of light, and expect them to agree at any time to die at his command with little more justification than "because I say so," had to have a touch of the despot in him. Kirk had that touch, and that made Mitchell's job easier.

Easier in one sense, harder in the long run. To execute his plan, Mitchell would have to allow Kirk to keep the Enterprise under his thumb. If he let Kirk have his autonomy, sooner or later the servant would decide to overthrow the master, and Mitchell would have to eliminate both Kirk and the ship.

By that time, he would have drained all the power and amusement he could get out of the Enterprise. He could hardly wait for the main course after the appetizer, when an entire planet of smug, emotionally corseted Vulcans were faced with the dark selves they had struggled to deny.

"Servant," Mitchell said, "attend me. I'm hungry."

"I canna," Scott said. "Ye have me bolted to he floor."

"Isn't this what you wanted?" Mitchell said. "Captain Kirk knows you better than you know yourself. We were sure this would be your heart's desire. You love your engines so much, and now you will never have to be separated from them, or have truck with the Human race again. I know you must feel gratitude; he programmed it into you."

A large tear of machine oil dribbled down Scott's gunmetal cheek. The droplet hung at the hinge of his jaw, and he brushed it away with a clank. He had no heart anymore, only a collection of gears, flywheels and microchips, and the sand-filled grating inside his chest cavity echoed the dying protests of the station on the planet without a name, and prefigured the station's fate: to be used for evil, then smashed.

•••

Amanda had appeared on the terrace to speak with Commander Hatfield, but found her eyes drawn to the paradox sailing through the night sky. The women stood side by side for fully an hour before Amanda spoke.

"It travels fast, doesn't it?"

"Only on our side," Hatfield said. "At the speed it crosses the horizon, it should be coming overhead three times an hour, like a meteor. But it comes every fifty minutes, and hangs there, like a fixed star. It has to be speeding up on the light side, and slowing here, where we can see it. He must be doing that deliberately."

"Captain Kirk is something of a show-off," Amanda said, as politely as possible. She wasn't sure how Hatfield felt about Kirk, but her experience was that women who boarded the Enterprise disembarked with more stars in their eyes than those they had seen on any viewscreen. With a mother's pride, she could see no other reason or the distance between Hatfield and Spock, a distance that seemed as much due to Hatfield's own reserve as her son's.

"I hope it's only showing off," Hatfield said, never taking her eyes from the shining speck that paraded arrogantly overhead.

And silence fell between them, a distance even greater than the miles of emptiness stretching to the man-made star overhead.

Hatfield broke the quiet at last. Knowing, as she had not yet learned to shield herself from knowing, what Amanda was going to say made it imperative she try to direct the conversation, making it less painful.

"Spock didn't come to supper tonight," Hatfield observed flatly.

"No," Amanda admitted.

"You are concerned."

"I thought he might be out here with you."

"He...had to leave. The matter was urgent."

Amanda opened her mouth, then snapped it shut, waiting for an explanation.

"I know what you're thinking," Hatfield continued. "Yes. I did ask him to go. But not for the reasons you think." Amanda's small smile dismayed Hatfield. "Which doesn't mean the reasons you think wouldn't have come up sooner or later. I'm sorry, my lady."

"May I share one personal experience with you?" Amanda said. "If you're frightened -- I can tell you -- there's nothing to be frightened of about loving a Vulcan."

"But don't you see?" Hatfield cried, throwing tact out the window. "At least you love a whole Vulcan. Maybe if I stay here long enough, I'll find a whole Vulcan to love too. Or maybe I'll go home and love a whole Human. But--"

"Perhaps that is what you'd better do, then," Amanda said. "Go home."

"I'm sorry," Hatfield said.

"Spock is right," Amanda said. "You're your father's daughter. In every way"

"I wish I were," Hatfield said. She had the power to stop clocks. However hard she wished, she could not stop time, or she would not only have stopped the passage of time, but smashed it utterly. "My father almost seems to be used to dealing with Spock," she ventured. "But he's not marrying him. How can I love half a man?"

"You're right," Amanda said coldly. "Nobody could expect you to love a half-man. That is not a fault. But clearly it takes a better person than you to love a whole Spock. He's not a half-anything. He's a whole Spock. You are the one who is less than whole."

"I'm sorry," Hatfield said.

"No apology required," Amanda said. After a moment's consideration, she patted Hatfield's wrist maternally. "To accept Spock for what he is is asking far too much of you, when he still doesn't accept it himself. Maybe someday, I can ask again."

The Vulcan sky unfolded above them like a gilded baroque painting. Through some quirk of atmospheric conditions, the Enterprise's gleam had girdled the horizon with a broad rainbow. "Lovely, isn't it?" Amanda said. "So hopeful. The

end of the storm."

Hatfield made no answer.

•••

The only living thing Spock could find on the bridge was himself. The controls proceeded like motorized zombies through routine functions. Uhura's board blinked and hissed, lights at Sulu's console signaled a deceptive normality as the ship relentlessly continued its orbit, and the muted clicks, buzzes, hums and pops of a typical day on the Enterprise provided their usual accompaniment to otherwise ordinary activity.

Smothering his uneasiness, Spock began a methodical check of all stations, starting with his own. Even a small error would have tallied with common sense, but there seemed to be nothing wrong on the bridge, except for the complete absence of people.

As he bent over his station, a voice reverberated lazily behind him through the seemingly cavernous bridge. "Nice to have a little elbow room in here, isn't it, Spock?"

Spock turned. Kirk was sitting in his accustomed place, head thrown back as if taking the sun on some distant beach, eyes closed, luxuriating.

"I did not hear you enter," Spock said. "Perhaps you can throw some light upon these occurrences. The crew--"

"--will return when I am ready for them. It is none of your business where they are."

"Sir," Spock said, "I beg to differ. As a commander--"

"There can be only one 'commander' on this ship, mister, and that's me," Kirk said. "I suggest you stop asking awkward questions."

Spock's tone sharpened. "I am beginning to suspect you are not Captain Kirk at all," he said warily.

"Wrong. I am more Captain Kirk than I ever was before," Kirk said. "A real commander, not the kind of milksop you think you can push around. This ship will be run my way, and if you're really as smart as you think you are, you won't get in my way," he said.

Spock slipped a hand down toward his phaser.

Kirk's eyes flew open and fixed, burning and swirling, on Spock.

"No," Spock said.

"Go ahead," Kirk said. "Blast away. Your phaser won't so much as split a fingernail. You can't do anything to me. But I can do anything -- anything I like -- to you. And what, Mr. Spock, do you think I am going to do to you?"

"I have no notion," Spock said. "Except that I would prefer you did not do it."

"Why, Mr. Spock," Kirk said, "if I didn't know better, I'd almost say you're afraid of me. But fear is an emotional reaction."

"I must confess to a certain ambivalence," Spock said. "You have the appearance of my captain."

"Any shape-changer could feign that," Kirk said. "That's twice now I've caught you being illogical."

Spock furrowed his brow, and concentrated on burrowing through the stench of tyranny and arrogance surrounding the figure in the chair. The telepathic bond between him and his captain, forged in combat and tempered in calm loyalty, had saved Kirk's life more than once. The bond was something which his Vulcan reserve did not permit him to discuss with Kirk, and to use the link to read Kirk's mind, even if possible, would have been a horrendous breach of etiquette. Usually, Spock accepted the subliminal erratic buzzing, as he accepted the hum of the ship itself, and tuned the presence down to an acceptable level.

He pulled the bond taut, hoping there was still someone on the other end of it, Captain Kirk -- Jim -- T'hy'la!

Kirk's eyes sputtered and dimmed to hazel. "Spock," he whispered. "Sickbay. Engineering. Don't--"

The engine hum leaped to a roar, pounding Spock's sensitive ears. In self-defense, he broke the bond and collapsed to his knees, flinging his arms over his head to ward off the barrage of sound and light.

The ship's scream died as suddenly as it had arisen. When he raised his head again, he gazed into two glowing, pitiless abysses.

"We shall not be defeated so easily," the captain said.

Spock shook his head, numbed. "Jim Kirk is still within you. He is a good and kind man."

"And so am I, Mr. Spock. Except I have the kind of power 'Jim Kirk' never had, and I'm not afraid to use it. Why, do you know how merciful I am?" He fixed a baleful grin on the kneeling figure. "I am going to give you your heart's desire."

He flung one arm in the air, and brought it down, grasping an invisible sword of some unknown power that cleaved Spock in two as easily as a piece of ripe cheese.

In that instant, Spock was aware of his own consciousness standing apart, watching. He clasped his hands as if vainly trying to hold himself together.

Kirk levitated himself halfway to the ceiling to get a better view, and chuckled. "Just what you've always wanted."

The two hands became four, as Spock watched himself watching himself watching...he willed his hands to unclasp.

He opened his eyes and beheld Spock. No, not quite as he remembered in the mirror. He looked at the chiselled green-tinted hands, the ascetic black helmet of hair, and the severe, gracefully tapering ears.

Spock pulled his hands away in what, in any creature other than a Vulcan, would have been horror. He surveyed the soft, rounded eyebrows and tousled bourbon-colored hair that draped halfway over a golden-pink forehead and cuplike ears.

"Spock," Kirk said, "meet Spock. I'd say I hope you get along famously, except you never have before."

The Human Spock held his own hands before his face, at once appalled and delighted, and not quite convinced the pink appendages were his own. He let loose a laugh of recognition, and turned to greet his new brother.

The Vulcan Spock shrank away from the Human's embrace, and pointed to him. "Dispose of this creature," he said to Kirk.

"You can't do that!" the Human said. "I'm you. You're me. We're us! I mean--"

"You do not know what you mean," Vulcan Spock said. "Which is to be expected. Do not babble. The noise distracts me." A purely dispassionate distaste creased his angular face, and he pointed again to his doppelganger. "I repeat my request. Dispose of him."

"There's two of us against one of him," Human Spock said. "We can fight him, if we stick together."

"I have no desire to do so," his other self replied. "He is clearly more powerful than either of us, together or apart. Your irrationality, emotionality and similar Human weaknesses make you a handicap to me, were I to decide to fight him -- and I cannot fight him alone. Thus, it is only logical I choose self-preservation, and join the winning side."

Before he could even draw a breath to protest, Human Spock felt strong, familiar-yet-alien fingers wrap around his throat.

"Talshaya is merciful," Vulcan Spock said. "You shall feel no pain. You have been a constant source of shame to me, an embarrassment that should never have existed. You shall exist no more."

Human Spock instinctively brought his knee up into the solar plexus of his nemesis. The move didn't injure Vulcan Spock, but knocked him off balance, and Human Spock bolted to the lift, sucking air through his bruised windpipe with a pained gasp.

"Do not let him flee," Vulcan Spock said, as the door whooshed open.

"Why not?" Kirk said. "Where can he go?"

"Your power could smite him where he stands," Vulcan Spock said. "Or you could force him to return."

"Perhaps I could," Kirk said. He floated featherlike back down to the deck. "But I command here, and I don't choose to, for reasons of my own." He blinked, a momentary flash of hazel-flecked silver, then shone his luminous gaze steadily upon the solemn servant he had created.

•••

Had the appearance of the Enterprise in Vulcan's night sky occurred only a handful of millenia before, its existence would have precipitated the assassination of rulers, the toppling of empires, and the sacrifice of numberless domestic animals — and a few children — to now-toppled gods. The age of portents was long past. As it was, the Vulcans were not above a mild show of alarm when tides began to overflow the banks of their placid rivers, and torrential rains pummeled the hidden enclaves of the devotees of Kolinahr.

Sarek and Amanda oiled and forced shut the decrepit barriers across the windows, which had not been used since the time of Sarek's great-great grandsire, Scarath, who had himself been the first to try to subdue the elements.

The provincial magistrate of ShanaiKahr sent a discreet and tactfully worded message to T'Pol herself, requesting that she bring her most gracious majesty to bear on the esteemed captain of the U.S.S. Enterprise, and remind him that Vulcan was a member and ally of the Federation. Custom did not allow, the magistrate pointed out, for an ally to disrupt the gravitational field and orbit of another ally's planet to such an extent as to threaten utter ruin of the latter's agriculture. He also requested emergency planet-quake relief, and advised Her Serenity to prepare for emergency famine relief as well if the situation were not alleviated.

Sarek, despite his honorary status as provincial governor of ShiKahr and environs, sent no message. His entire attention, at least for the nonce, was given over to the young Human woman who lay in bed, not conscious but too restless to be sleeping, and to his wife, who sat by her, afraid more to see her wake than to watch her continue to languish. The few times she had awakened, she had spoken of their son. He had to take her garbled ravings as pure delirium, for it was not acceptable to his logical being to accept them as truth.

•••

Sickbay, Human Spock thought as he bolted from the lift and down the corridor. Jim said to go to Sickbay. But that's just what I should not do, what he tells me. He ran down the corridor, heedless of the thundering of his footfall through the cavernous empty ship. What deck am I on? he thought. I didn't even stop to look. Damn.

He stopped, savoring the unaccustomed profanity. Then he ran again.

He came to a door that seemed familiar and read the nameplate.

"Cmdr. Spock." That's me. Or is it? He punched up the access code and entered. How bleak. How could he — I — ever have lived here? There is no sign of me within these antiseptic walls.

He saw himself in the full-length mirror, and blushed at his nakedness. Why am I embarrassed? My other self would be thinking purely of how embarrassed the Humans would be, and puzzled at their embarrassment. It is quite warm enough in here without clothes, he told himself.

Yet even if I were to bar every portal and drape the mirror, and stay hidden from all eyes until the ship explodes and the world goes black forever, I would still be embarrassed. I would still desire to be clothed.

So this is what it is to be a Human, he realized. To be ashamed and not know why. At least as a halfbreed, I knew what I was ashamed of.

He opened the closet. I am more naked without my logic than without my clothes, he thought. But since I cannot have my logic, I may at least dress. He selected one of his standard-issue life sciences shirts, then put it back. I have

no logical reason to not desire to wear the color blue; it exists only as light refracted in the eye of the beholder. Just as Nurse Chapel has no logical reason to believe it "suits" me. There is no good reason not to wear this.

Instead he took a set of khaki engineer's coveralls.

I take after my mother, he thought, preening as he recombed his hair. How lovely she was when she was young.

He sat on the bed to pull on his boots. His next step was logical, but that was not why he would take it: to find someone who would understand.

Uncertain on his feet, he rose and forced himself to take one step at a time toward the door, which would lead to the corridor, the lift, and eventually to Sickbay.

♦♦♦

Chekov rattled the bars of the gilded playpen Kirk had designed for him. "Presumptuous child," his captain had told him. "You think some day you'll be good enough to take my place." And Kirk had put him in his place. It is enough to make one wish he were with the others, wherever they may be, the lieutenant thought.

"You are a very lucky person, Lieutenant Uhura," Chekov said. "He keeps you very comfortable."

Uhura flopped over on her stomach on her tasseled cushion. "Enforced comfort is no comfort at all, Mr. Chekov. I can't get up."

Chekov rattled the bars of the playpen petulantly. "I do not know which is worse; being caged up in here or knowing that this is all he thinks of my maturity."

Uhura shifted, glanced down at herself, and lay one hand modestly across her jeweled bosom. "Worry about important things, Mr. Chekov," he said. "If you think your feelings are hurt, look at me. Would you consider this a fair representation of my chief value aboard ship?"

"Well," Chekov said, "at least it's flattering."

"But I'm not like this!" she said. "At least, I don't think I am. This isn't reality," she sighed. "It's fantasy."

"I wonder," Chekov said, "whose reality? Or whose fantasy?"

Both, in their separate prisons, retreated into silence. The answers hung in the air, unvoiced, between them.

♦♦♦

The ship blinked.

"No," Jim Kirk cried, hazel embers flaring briefly once again to defiant life."

For a fraction of an instant, so fleeting that not even the central monitors at ShaliKahr's vast computer nexus could have caught the movement (had they not already been reduced to rubble by the wrath of the demon ship), the skies of Vulcan became barren again.

The great glowing miasma hovering above the planet, for that instant, rejoined the ranks of Starfleet's ordinary vessels.

The door of the lift opened at deck five to disgorge Human Spock. He found himself nose-to-nose with Nurse Christine Chapel.

Disoriented and dishevelled, Chapel had barely time to ask "What--?" before she, and a dozen other crewmen she staggered against the corridor walls, vanished again.

Human Spock braced himself against the open door of the lift. I was warned that the shock of experiencing Human emotion might drive me mad, he thought.

The instant passed, and all returned to the crazy normality that had held sway throughout his return to the ship. He set out down the empty corridor again, at first walking, then running, toward Sickbay.

Mitchell, ensconced on his radioactive altar, in that one instant turned to shadow and ash. Scott, turning his head smoothly, with neither clank nor creak, saw a translucent illusion draped over broken bones, and nothing more.

The spectre's jaws opened in a rictus of rage. "No!" he answered.

The hazel spark was quenched again. Mitchell grew to solidity, even larger than before, a luminous malevolent tumor in the bowels of the Enterprise. Scott, with a creak and a clank, returned to his drudgery.

In the instant after the instant, Vulcan Spock also blinked. He surveyed his commander, assimilated the unusual occurrence, and decided it warranted no action on his part. He returned to his impassive cogitation, fingers tented under his nose like an old-Earth idol.

•••

Human Spock leaned against the closed door of the sickbay and placed a hand on his heaving breastbone. I'll never get used to it being up there where my liver ought to be, he thought. His puny Human lungs felt punctured, and his comparatively weak Human muscles were aching at the Vulcan-style demands he was making on them. Even if nobody was in Sickbay, he decided, perhaps he could get an icepack and a shot of Tri-Ox.

The door opened automatically and he stumbled into a half-darkened office. Beyond, he could see a dim light, and a shadow that seemed at least semi-human.

He reached for the dimmer and began to bring up the lights.

"Go away," McCoy's voice croaked.

"I've come to help you," Human Spock said.

"You can't help me," McCoy answered. "Go away, before he finds you here and it's the end of both of us. Though perhaps that would be a mercy."

Human Spock's hand grasped the dimmer and froze. Strange. I had always believed curiosity was a function of my Vulcan nature. But the Human seems to have his fair share.

He brought the sickbay lights to a blinding artificial noon, and threw his arm across his face to ward off the creature supine on the diagnostic couch.

"McCoy?" Human Spock said.

The figure on the couch propped himself up on his scrawny, rash-covered elbows. "I told you to go away," he said. "Don't come any closer. I'm highly contagious." His wasted features quivered as he let loose a croupy cough.

Human Spock lowered his forearm and crept cautiously toward the bed. "I don't care," he said. "What is it you've got?"

"What can you think of?" McCoy said. "Whatever you can come up with I've got. Three hundred syllables worth of creeping necrosis," he said. "Except nothing fatal. I couldn't be that lucky. He won't let me just die and get it over with too fast." The ailing doctor peered at the visitor. "Do I know you?"

"Maybe," he grunted. "What happened?"

"He — Captain Kirk — something's happened to him. He dragged me down here in the middle of the night, pushed me onto this table, and told me he was going to give me everything I've always wanted. What he gave me was what you can see. Every known disease."

"Captain Kirk can't possible know every human disease," Human Spock said.

"I did manage to run a few tests on myself, while I still had a little strength to stand up," McCoy said. "He left out the incurables. Probably because he didn't want me to die."

"Anyone as sick as you are would die anyway, except he wants you alive," Human Spock said. He reached out a hand of consolation, then withdrew it as disgust for the mottled, tumor-ridden flesh swept over him. "So maybe there's some other reason he left them out. Maybe he didn't think of them."

Human Spock turned away. His eye lit on the clear shatterproof shutters of the supply cabinets. "There is, of course, a ready and legible source of names of exotic diseases right at hand for a layman to check out," he said. He opened the cabinets. "Namely, your antidotes. Doctor, I am willing to bet that every malady you have now is taken from these labels."

A glimmer of hope sparkled in McCoy's dulled eyes. "Now, that's logical."

Human Spock winced. "Call it a lucky guess." He yanked open a drawer and

began to fill hypos with the contents of the various bottles, lining them on the counters in slightly crooked rows.

"You ought to sterilize them first," McCoy suggested.

"Afraid you'll catch something?" Human Spock snapped. "Dammit, you're a patient, not a doctor! A couple of germs should be the least of your worries now."

"No one can take that much medication in one dose," McCoy said. "I'll die of the cure instead of the disease."

Human Spock held the last hypo up to the light and shook it. The cloudy liquid turned clear, and he nodded smugly. "You said Kirk wouldn't let you die. And it has to be better than living like this, doesn't it? Now, this won't hurt a bit."

McCoy tried to clamber off the bed. Human Spock pinned him with one hand and grabbed for a hypo with the other.

"Your bedside manner stinks," McCoy opined.

"And you make a lousy patient," Human Spock said. "I hope you remember what it feels like, if you ever get back to regular duty."

"I'll have you up on charges before the Surgeon Gen--"

Human Spock jammed the first of many hypos into McCoy's forearm. The doctor became rigid and fell back, breathing shallowly. Human Spock tossed the used hypo casually over his shoulder and reached for another.

•••

More than three days had passed before Earth Central realized that perhaps something was not as it should be on Vulcan. Starfleet Command at first dismissed the Vulcans' silence as a natural consequence of their tight-lipped pragmatism. More than once, weeks had passed with no communication from the Eridani system, and once an entire fleet of emergency vessels, led by two fully armed heavy cruisers, had been dispatched. The rescue fleet had been met with the calm explanation that sending subspace messages was a waste of time and effort unless the Vulcans had something to say, and offered shore leave privileges and a complimentary glass of iced q'brat tea.

A passing merchant ship, detouring to replenish its stock of kivas and trillium, alerted Starfleet without realizing anything was wrong. The navigator of the Sally R sent a breathelessly boastful dispatch requesting special recognition, and perhaps a small medal, from Starfleet Command for his contribution to space cartography in observing a hitherto undiscovered moon orbiting Vulcan.

The little ship was respectfully requested to proceed at once to the nearest starbase, twelve light-hours away. The thrilled crew managed to make it in ten, and marched proudly down the gangplank, chests puffed out and ready for medals. They were promptly placed under maximum-security custody, and it took another three hours of intensive interrogation before the admirals could coerce a coherent story out of the terrified navigator.

Civilians, Admiral Nogura sighed to himself, reviewing the tapes of the questioning sessions. Find a little hydrogen cloud, and they think you should go out and save the universe or something. Nevertheless, there was definitely something in the vicinity of Vulcan that had been there before, and maybe it merited an investigation. If he did not, the Vulcans would heat up their little-used subspace to complain, which was all they ever seemed to do with it anyway. Nogura seemed to recall that the Avenger was due for a shore leave and a glass of iced tea.

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Human Spock lifted one of McCoy's eyelids, and examined the unseeing eye. The gumminess was gone, and the pupils were no longer dilated. The worst of the rashes had disappeared, and a couple of open sores on the left leg had scabbed over and shrunk. In a gamble of kill or cure, he thought he had won. The antidotes had acted symbiotically. Together, they had eased the strain on McCoy's weakened system instead of overtaxing it. Grudgingly, he had to credit the man's will to live as

well, but he figured he had done passably on his first emergency call.

McCoy's breathing was still uneven, but at least he was filling his lungs; up to eighty-five percent of normal capacity, Human Spock noted with satisfaction. Blood pressure coming back up, too. He wasn't sure just what the other indicators on the panel overhead might signify, but as long as they beeped and hummed low and steadily, he would trust his instincts and assume McCoy was improving.

He padded out of the lab again, leaving his patient to rest, and seated himself at McCoy's desk, staring at the blank screen of the library monitor.

He started when the signals from the lab jumped slightly, but they settled down again, and so did he. Probably having a bad dream. Aren't we all? he thought.

He studied the screen as if his troubled thoughts alone could animate the mechanism, causing images to coalesce on it which he could then view in order to explain his own notions to himself. He was thinking without fully understanding just what he was thinking.

Heart's desire, he thought. He has thrown at least two of us into Hell, and told us he believes that is where we want to be. Perhaps it doesn't sound logical, and barely a day ago I would not have understood. But there is a dark logic of the heart, a perverse equation of light and balancing out to a gray opacity in each of us.

The monitor blipped again in the lab. Human Spock ignored it.

McCoy opened his eyes and struggled to focus them. He gingerly slid one leg off the bed and tested it with a tap on the floor. He patted himself up and down, pleased to discover he was still in one piece.

He lay back and closed his eyes again, trying to res summon images of his waking dream. While his body preoccupied itself with the task of healing, his mind had been freed to roam, and had pieced together parts of the jigsaw puzzle.

He slipped off the bed, and the steady pulse of the panel faltered and ceased.

Human Spock turned from the dark screen. As far as he knew, sudden silence could mean only one thing. He hastened into the examining room, and wilted when he saw that the sound could mean life as well as death.

McCoy steadied himself with both hands on the wall, and faced the man who had saved his life.

"Yes," he said. "It is you, isn't it? I won't even dare to ask how."

Human Spock's face crinkled into a wide, spontaneous smile.

"What you did," McCoy said, "is not anything any remotely rational man would try. Even I wouldn't try that trick."

A chuckle began somewhere deep behind Human Spock's breastbone, vibrating through his entire torso and emerging as a full-blown laugh, refreshing as a spring shower.

"I owe you one," McCoy said, and extended his hand shyly.

Human Spock grasped the hand. Instead of shaking it, he pulled McCoy into a rough, clumsy fraternal embrace. "Forgive my clumsiness, Bones," he said. "I haven't had much practice at this."

Human Spock's smile straightened, and the laugh diminished. McCoy had grown stiff and cold. For a moment he believed in horror that the strain of rising might have brought on a relapse, he felt the doctor's muscles constrict and the body shrink away from his clasp with a small, stiff series of spasms.

"Like a mimosa tree on Earth," he said. "You fold up when I touch you..." He held McCoy at arm's length, and lifted his hands away, to hover only a centimeter from each of McCoy's shoulders.

"I'm sorry, Spock," McCoy murmured. "I'm not ready for this."

"So," Human Spock said coldly. "All these years -- it was you, as much as I." His hands descended again on McCoy's shoulders. "All these years, of your hectoring me, badgering me, pushing me. Open up. Show your emotions. Feel. Love. Care. Demanding -- secure in the belief that I would never respond."

McCoy did not answer. Human Spock had lost the power of mind-melding, but he did not need it to know what McCoy was thinking.

"Doctor," he said. "You once told me I wouldn't know what to do with a genuine, decent feeling. Well, here it is, McCoy. Now, do you know what to do with it?"

He released McCoy and fled the room, dimming the lights as he left. He knew that any answer McCoy chose to give him would surely be highly awkward for both of them.

♦♦♦

"Science Officer," Captain Loewe said, "Report."

"Entering standard orbit--" Vosselaer began.

"No, no, no!" Loewe said. He pointed at the screen. "Report on that. Tell me what that big gasbag is before we get one millimeter closer."

Vosselaer shrugged. "I'd like to know too, sir. But the readings I'm getting are entirely contradictory. According to this, it's at least three different mutually exclusive entities, simultaneously. In other words, it ain't there. It can't possibly be."

Loewe swiveled his chair. "God, Riley, am I glad you're back. Take over and give Mr. Vosselaer a lesson in his duties." Riley obediently took the station.

"I hate to be the messenger who brings bad news," Riley said at last, and mimicked Vosselaer's shrug. "He's right. According to these data, it's exuding organic energy. That is," he ticked off on his index finger, "it's one big living thing. One big living Human thing."

"Not possible," Loewe said.

"But--" Riley added his middle finger to the count-- "it's also a big chunk of dilithium, pure mineral power. And third--"

"I suppose you're going to tell me it's vegetable too?"

"No sir," Riley said. "But our autocoder radioed for ID, and the response indicates it's the Enterprise."

"First Officer," Loewe said patiently, "select one of the three. Until we do, I have no clear procedure to follow in dealing with it. If it's a natural phenomenon, we probe it. If it's a hostile entity, we destroy it. If it's the Enterprise, we invite Kirk over for a drink."

"I can't choose, sir. I have no more to base a conclusion on than what I just told you."

Vosselaer leaned on the panel with a smug smile. "I told you so, sir," he said.

"At attention, soldier, when you say that," Loewe said. "Since I can't choose from the three, I order alternative four. Synchronize orbit to keep the planet between us. Try not to let it notice us, if it's capable of noticing. We'll wait an hour, then take the alternatives in order. We'll study this awhile. If it isn't a natural phenomenon, we'll invite its captain for a drink. And if that doesn't pan out..." he shoed away a yeoman with another report for his signature.

♦♦♦

Human Spock clapped his hands over his ears and moaned. He had not realized how efficiently an elegant set of hypersensitive Vulcan ears could orchestrate a symphony out of cacophony. Human ears allowed everything to merge into a discordant fugue. The sounds of the haunted ship -- the muted beeps of haywire computers, the hum and crackle of shorted circuits, the timid whining of metal against metal -- clamored in the background as he worked, and his dulled sense absorbed them all without discrimination.

Spock jammed the probe into the circuitry at random, and the screen flickered to snowy life, briefly. Then he jiggled the instrument and the screen went dark again. His training could only take him so far in his task. Without his logic, he could not apply the knowledge and figure out how to override Kirk and Mitchell to tap the banks. He could add two and two, but somehow he couldn't come up with four.

Then he heard the tapping. One thud. A long pause. Another thud. He

swiveled his chair to face the door.

If Tiberius is playing a trick, it is indeed a cruel one. But if it is no trick, then I would be the cruel one.

He pressed a button on the armrest to unlock the door. It slid open. For a moment the empty doorway gaped. Then McCoy leaned heavily against the doorframe.

Spock extended his hand.

McCoy shook his head.

Spock shrugged and returned to his tinkering. McCoy limped across the room and flopped into the nearest chair.

There they remained for nearly an hour, Spock pretending to work, McCoy pretending to sleep.

Spock poked clumsily as deep into the guts of the board as he could see. At the bottom of the main board was one slender connection that bulged oddly. That had to be the glitch. He inched his probe toward it.

He jumped at the raspy whisper behind him, and the probe slipped, spitting one fat, vicious spark and sending an unpleasant tingle up his arm.

"I must say you've got some nerve, locking me out of my own office," McCoy muttered.

Spock clenched his teeth. How good it would feel to beat this man to a pulp. Instead, he opened one of McCoy's cabinets, took out a pre-packed medikit, and tossed it across the room into the doctor's lap.

"Here," Spock said. "Tri-ox. Hyperalimentary compound DT-23."

McCoy sullenly jammed the hyposprays against his own arm.

Spock watched, drumming his fingers on the inert computer.

"Well," McCoy said.

"You are a fine one to speak of locking people out," Spock said. "Perhaps I would have spared myself a great deal of trouble by leaving you as I found you."

"So why didn't you?"

"Because you are my friend," Spock growled. "Now, as you can see, I'm in the middle of a very difficult job. So if you can't help, at least be quiet!"

Spock studied the board again, perplexed. The sandpaper drawl broke in on his concentration.

"Lift out the top board. You'll see a green grid. That's the backup network. Hooks directly into life support." Spock complied. "To access files, though, you'll need to rig a bypass. This only handles communications and medical equipment. Now, if you'll notice that little clump of connections under the red wire—"

Human Spock did not turn to show the doctor his smile as he delved into the board again.

♦♦♦

How long have I been asleep? Sulu wondered. I'm still asleep.

He tried to flicker an eyelid, and discovered he had none to flicker. It did not occur to him to be upset. He merely relaxed and merged again into the warm white void.

What little of Sulu was aware and awake could not sense the boundaries of his skin, and did not need the service of his senses nor his muscles. After four years of Academy training, six years in general service, and five intense years under a demanding and busy captain, it was nice not to have to do anything, but simply to be.

Sargon and Thalassa merged with the void. Apollo spread himself upon the wind.

An icicle of rage stabbed through the blanket of peace and into the core of Sulu's misty awareness. He wanted his bone and muscle back immediately and desperately. He wanted his legs back, to run.

Mitchell smiled, the broken remnants of Human teeth framed in the shimmering rock of fleshless lips. I remember this one, the creature thought.

Sulu felt thicker, and heavier, and more fearful, with the passing seconds, as the icicle stabbed deeper. Mitchell sifted the floating dust, searching for as

much of Sulu as he could find.

Kirk had deeply disappointed his mentor. The crewmen he had chosen to keep were all people he had never seen before. There could be little pleasure in breaking these strangers. If he had not seized the engineer before Kirk had shut the toolbox lid, he would have had nothing to play with at all.

With every micron of mass, Sulu regained another scrap of self. He had not regained the sense of time, and could not know what long, arduous efforts Mitchell had required to find and coalesce him. But at last he had enough awareness not only to fear but to act, and enough mass.

The icicle stabbed, and Sulu flexed his soft, loose mass, with a memory of firm, battle-trying muscle.

If he'd had a fist, it would have been a rabbit punch. But Sulu simply scattered to dust again.

Mitchell retreated in frustration. He had not come all this way to be denied on the verge of his revenge. He vented his anger briefly by shorting out one of Scott's minor circuits, and promised that when Tiberius's time came at last, this would be one more debt to pay with interest.

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Human Spock slapped the controls of the library console. "He's jamming everything," he said. "There's no way I can explain to you what has a hold of Captain Kirk unless I can get you to understand who Gary Mitchell was."

McCoy curled forward in his chair. Human Spock briskly tapped McCoy's knee as a friendly caution not to try to walk again just yet.

"What would the log tapes tell us, anyway?" McCoy asked. "You never found out what warped Mitchell into what he became. What I want to know is, how did Jim get this power now, when whatever hit Mitchell the first time around didn't get him?"

"Mitchell gave it to him," Human Spock said simply.

"So where is Mitchell getting it? What's fueling them?" McCoy persisted. "I've seen some pretty weird creatures in my time. Whether you're a Horta and eat rocks, or a Triacan feeding on fear, or a Human gorging on ice cream sundaes, if you're an entity expending energy, you have to eat."

"That seems to make sense," Human Spock said. "I wish you hadn't mentioned eating, though. It has been quite a while since we've had access to the mess hall."

"Once we pull the plug on Jim and this Mitchell character, we'll treat ourselves to a full-scale Lucullan feast," McCoy said. "For now settle for the vita-supplements."

"On old Earth, I understand, they called it 'hardtack'," Human Spock said and made a wry face. "Appropriately named."

McCoy folded his arms. "Now, look," he said. "Try to approach this logically. You've got the background and I've got the brains. I'm sure we can figure out what's going on here."

"But he was dead," Spock said. "We left him at the edge of the galaxy under a five-ton boulder. He didn't have the kind of strength he has now."

"What's the difference between then and now? Think, man! I know you can do it. You've always done it before. We depend on you to do it."

Human Spock bent over, elbows on his knees, marshalling every scrap of logic that was grudgingly left to him in the divorce from his other half. "Some of the power has always been Mitchell's," he said at last. "He was born with an extraordinary extra-sensory perception quotient. Hitting the barrier amplified it, up to the level Jim is at now. As for what made him super-powerful, that has to be something he met up with sometime in the past five years."

"Something on the planet?"

"There's only one thing on the planet," Human Spock said. He suddenly clapped his hands together like a delighted child. "A lithium-cracking station. And what's in a lithium-cracking station?"

"Lithium, of course."

"And what's on a starship, Doctor?"

"Di-lithium," McCoy said triumphantly, lurching to his feet.

"Not bad," he said, catching McCoy's elbow, "for an illogical Human. My guess is that the lithium preserved and energized whatever turned him 'bad' in the first place. Lithium energy, probably from our engines, is what's keeping him going now. If we can cut off his lifeline, deny him the ability to tap into the ship's power, he'll die."

"What if we can't?" McCoy said. "Or if dilithium isn't the secret ingredient?"

"Then, we die," Human Spock said. "See how simple it is? Really no mystery at all. And if our guess is correct, then we know where to find him. When you want to eat, you go where the food is. Just as you and I would go to the mess hall for an ice cream sundae--" he licked his lips wistfully-- "he's almost certainly in the engine rooms."

"Which we can't get to," McCoy said. "Back where we started."

"There's only one person on board who can. James Kirk."

"You mean 'Tiberius'," McCoy said. "I don't want to face him again. Not only because he might kill me, but because seeing Jim reduced to this -- well, I'd almost rather have the Serisian Hydrophobia again."

"If we don't go looking for him, he'll certainly come looking for us," Human Spock said. "He'll get bored and want to come back and play. Add to that that the Vul--" McCoy looked up sharply. "He has an assistant of sorts," Human Spock continued, "who wants me wiped out of existence. And I know him well enough to know he isn't the kind to give up."

"So, plan A, we go looking for him, and die sooner, or plan B, we hang around waiting for him to look for us and die later. What's the difference?"

"Suppose you're right," Human Spock said. "I don't accept that -- there may be a plan C that'll make itself apparent as circumstances change. But even if there isn't, if I have to die, I'd rather go down fighting. If I have to write my own epitaph, it'll be that I died with my boots on instead of being a mere toy for a tyrant to torment for a moment of diversion." He folded his arms and cocked his head at McCoy, daring him to contradict him.

McCoy whistled long and low in admiration. "You're really getting the hang of being Human." He reluctantly placed a hand on Spock's shoulder and hobbled forward.

♦♦♦

Riley turned his sweat- and tear-stained face to Loewe. "I have my analysis and recommendation ready, sir."

Loewe accepted the report from Riley's shaking hands. "It can't be that bad."

"No, it isn't that bad," Vosselaer interrupted. "It's worse. That apparition on our scanners is the Enterprise. No doubt about it. She identified herself to the Vulcans shortly after entering orbit."

"Oh, so you managed to get through to Vulcan at last?" Loewe said.

"The Starfleet frequencies are all knocked out, and the cities that go with them," Vosselaer said crisply. "It's a godawful mess down there. They've been broadcasting an emergency appeal to Kirk to pull out of orbit non-stop on every frequency they have left. They sent up flares, they launched message satellites. No response."

"That's not the Jim Kirk I know," Loewe said. "I can't imagine what's possessed him."

"That's just it, sir," Riley said. "That's my analysis. Something's possessed him. Because what's happening on Vulcan isn't the half of it. What's happening on his ship -- or rather, what isn't happening. Sir, the Enterprise has a complement of 325 enlisted personnel and 83 officers as of Stardate 8903.35. Before it was destroyed by whatever's out there, our probe fed back a head count. According to the machine, as of Stardate 8905.33 -- fifteen minutes ago -- there are five living beings aboard the Enterprise, plus two quasi-Human entities that we

can't identify."

"Except that they evidently pack a wallop," Vosselaer said. "One of them ate the powerpack in that probe as if it were a bonbon and spat a hunk of tin back at us."

Loewe frowned. "Please boil down this doubletalk into something I can use. I asked you for an analysis and recommendation. Twenty-five words or less."

Five years peeled off Riley's features, revealing the timid, sensitive ensign who had revered Captain James T. Kirk in place of the father he had lost on Tarsus IV. "Sir, analysis: whatever the Enterprise may be in scientific terms is irrelevant. In pragmatic terms, she is a menace to the peace of Vulcan and the Federation. Recommendation: destroy."

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McCoy took one of Uhura's bare, bangled arms. Human Spock grasped the other. "Lean back," Spock said. "Pull." Uhura thrust herself upward arching vainly toward freedom.

"Ease off," McCoy said at last. "We'll tear her apart if we don't." He sank to one knee, his still debilitated body drained by the exertion. "She's not going anywhere until 'Tiberius' is ready to let her go."

Chekov poked his nose between the bars of his cage. "Do no even waste time trying to bend these," he said. "I have tried everything."

"Damn that iron will of Jim's," McCoy said. "These traps are every bit as strong and hard as his head."

"We freed you," Spock said. "We will get them out, too."

"Please, don't worry about us," Uhura said. "Worry about him. If he did this to us, who knows what he'll do next?"

McCoy wiped his brow. "Whatever did this isn't the Jim I knew."

"He told us he would give us our 'heart's desire'," Chekov said. "And then he glared at us with those strange eyes. I — I felt as if he was ripping right through my breastbone with them." Anger swelled Chekov's voice to a subdued roar of cold contempt. "And what he gave me was this. To be treated like a child! When this is what I would desire the least of anything! Haven't I spent my entire career aboard this ship trying to prove to him — to Starfleet — that I am ready for promotion?"

Human Spock looked to Uhura. She joined his indignant chorus, her voice shrilling above his. "Now, don't get me wrong, Mr. — ah — whoever. I know I'm not exactly plain. But I've always made a point of not using that as part of my professional equipment."

"You're aware, of course, that there have been rumors."

"Of course I am..." she said. "All the more reason to hate the idea like a plague."

McCoy flinched. "Please don't mention 'plague', Uhura."

"Instead of giving you your heart's desire, then, he gave each of us what we most feared," Human Spock said. "Unless..."

Unless the two can be one and the same. He looked to McCoy. Is there a side of any doctor that perversely delights in disease — and sublimates that strange fascination through fighting it?

Chekov struggles so hard to "grow up." Is there a side of him that fights because he fears the seductive fantasy of remaining a child? And as for seduction, even if Uhura is too scrupulous to use the attraction between her and the captain, it is clearly there, and against regulations.

So Kirk gave us our "heart's desire" in truth. The desires of the darkest part of the heart, the swamp out of which our noblest blossoms grow — and we avoid looking at the roots.

And I? What did he see in me?

"What's up?" McCoy said. "You look awfully thoughtful."

He looked into McCoy's fathomless eyes. He saw too much hurt, too much painful self-awareness already, at least part of which he had placed there.

"Nothing significant," he said, and beckoned McCoy to move on toward Engineering.

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The first blast merely tickled. Mitchell absorbed it directly into his substance, transfusing it into his mock-veins as easily as sugar-water. He took the second and third with equal aplomb. The phaser power that had been meant to destroy him, and the ship encasing him, he liquified and poured onto his mighty, glowing torso, nearly doubling his girth and adding a sinister, sickly green-yellow glow to his form.

He toyed with the idea of sending a message of thanks to the Avenger for so thoughtfully sending him a midnight snack. Scott had been a dutiful if sullen waiter, but the Enterprise's engines were nearly depleted by his constant demand for nourishment.

Then the fourth and fifth volleys landed, one on the heels of the other. The Enterprise reeled out of orbit as first the starboard shield buckled, then the port. Mitchell tried to tap into the glowing cloud surrounding the vessel, and failed. I can't tap into Human energy, he thought. I can manipulate a Human, but I can't feed. When I surrendered my Humanity, I never thought I'd need it again.

Mitchell flexed his mental muscles and invaded the computer circuits again. He dispatched two feeble phaser blasts of his own before re-erecting the damaged shields, and hauled the Enterprise back into orbit like a stubborn pack-animal.

Riley catapulted backward out of his seat and landed hard against the bridge railing. "Direct hit, sir," Vosselaer said as he clambered into Riley's seat at the weapons console. "Minor damage to the main hull."

"Mr. Riley!" Loewe yelled. "Shields up!" Riley scrambled to his feet. Vosselaer hurried to put the shields in place. "Why weren't they up sooner, before we joined this jolly little picnic?"

"I — it occurred to me, sir, I won't say it didn't. But sir," Riley stammered, "That's Captain Kirk out there! He wouldn't fire on us!"

"He just did," Loewe said. "Or someone did."

"Then it wasn't Captain Kirk, sir!" Riley insisted. Another blast rattled the Avenger, and Riley pitched against the railing. "He'd never do that."

"I tend to agree," Loewe said. "Kirk may or may not be aboard the Enterprise, but he sure as hell can't be running the ship. All right, then. We fired our warning shots. It's time for an all-out attack. All shields up. Go to red alert. Photon torpedoes ready. Aim all phasers and commence firing on my order--and no sooner. We're going to lie doggo for a bit, let him, or them, or it, think we're wounded. Then we'll blast 'em with everything we've got. And Mr. Riley, one thing I want to clear. Everything means everything. No mercy. And we do not stop until we've knocked every trace of that Flying Dutchman out of the sky forever. Is that quite clear?"

"Yes, sir," Riley mumbled. He turned to look at Lieutenant Ramirez trying to patch up the damage to her shorted-out communications console. For a moment, he saw someone else in that seat. "Goodbye, Sparks, if you aren't gone already," he said.

Loewe gripped the arms of his captain's chair, the only thing that was keeping him anchored to sanity. "Jim, I'm sorry," he said to the screen.

Vosselaer turned to Riley. "Are you hurt? Do you want me to call Dr. Piper?"

"No one is to notify Dr. Piper of what we're going to do until it's all over!" Loewe said. "It's bad enough we all have to know about it. I don't want to tell him just yet that we're going to blast his old shipmates to smithereens." He set his jaw and waited.

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Mitchell wiped heavy water from his brow. It had been so long since he had known exertion that the exhaustion of the fight nearly knocked him unconscious. He could no longer read what was happening aboard the Avenger, but he suspected only round one of the fight was over. He had to marshall his energies before the

bell rang for round two to commence.

Much as he hated to admit it, he had overextended himself. He had dallied too long on the Enterprise, savoring his revenge on Spock and the malevolent changes he had wrought in Kirk. He had forgotten he would not be truly omnipotent until he descended to Vulcan, and his cocksure laziness had nearly undone him.

There was only one quick source of power available to him to divert, unless he disarmed the ship by consuming the remaining power in her impulse engines and weapons. Mitchell realized he would have to take a chance that Tiberius was strong enough and ruthless enough to keep the Jim side of Kirk firmly reined in without his control.

Perhaps it was a gamble, and he was not a gambling man. Jim had fought so hard against Tiberius at the first, and even now was repressed and imprisoned, but not destroyed.

Still, Tiberius had proved such an imaginative and zestful autocrat that even Mitchell had been surprised. As an officer under Kirk's command, he had not suspected that Kirk, with whom he had wrestled in the gym and shared wild shore-leaves on a dozen planets, had so much evil in him.

He clenched his glistening fingers into fists, and began slowly to draw them to his chest, as he gathered back the power from Kirk. His confidence returned. After all, evil was always stronger than good. His mere existence proved that.

♦♦♦

Human Spock huddled close to the corner, and poked his head around the bend. He drew it back quickly. "There's something down there. Like a little shiny cloud. About the size of a Human."

"Well," McCoy said. "What is it?"

"If I knew, I'd tell you," Human Spock said. "But I think it's here we're finally going to have to face our greatest fear...and perhaps our 'heart's desire'." He turned to McCoy. "It's quite possible we're going to die. You were right. I don't believe we can win. And you were also right about something else."

McCoy smiled joylessly. "I kinda like hearing this. Are you sure you aren't going to take all this back?"

"I'm telling you because I won't have an opportunity. You were right on 892-IV."

"You still have a Vulcan's perfect memory, but I don't. When the devil was that?"

"The Roman civilization. The gladiatorial arena."

"I still don't remember."

"You told me I was not afraid of dying, because I was more afraid to live," Human Spock said. He extended his hand to McCoy. "Now that I know what it is to live fully as a Human, I don't think I want to. The strain of caring, the constant turmoil. Bones, how do you stand it?"

McCoy forced the words out in drips, like a water torture. "You have to just screen a lot of it out. Emotional 'white noise,' I guess. Nobody can stand the strain of caring about everyone, all the time. You pick out a few, and concentrate on worrying about them. You do your best for the rest, but most of the time you build a shell and hide in there."

"I see," he said. "You strive to become a Vulcan."

Human Spock did not speak again for a long moment, but kept his eyes fixed on the shadow-and-light cluster at the far end of the corridor. At last, he said, "I would prefer not to exist than to continue as I am. Or, worse — as I was. But I must be grateful to Kirk."

He touched McCoy's hand. "If you survive me, remember the moment we had as friends."

McCoy withdrew his hand again. "That genuine, decent feeling. I still don't know what to do with it, I guess," he admitted.

Human Spock stepped into the corridor, meeting the apparition at the end of the corridor with his full front.

The apparition at the far end of the hall fizzled out, and coalesced into a golden-eyed Kirk-idol looming bare inches away.

"You asked for it," Tiberius said, "and you are going to get it."

Vulcan Spock, at a slow and stately pace, brought up his ruler's train. He had waited this long to see his nemesis and double vaporized, and he saw no reason to hurry now.

McCoy stood at Human Spock's elbow. Vulcan Spock wrinkled his nose and pointed a long, bony finger at them.

"These creatures are an affront to all for which I exist," he told Tiberius. "I desire you destroy them both."

Kirk's glowing eyes winked, then flared. "Of what crime do you accuse them?"

"Weakness," Vulcan Spock said. "A character flaw with which I am sure you do not sympathize."

Human Spock's fear dwindled. A beatific calm surged through him. Of course, our heart's desire, I understand. He has given us our deepest fears, so that we may confront them, embrace them, and stop running away. I think I can die now, he thought, I've seen the worst, and there's nothing left to be afraid of.

Human Spock extended his arms toward Kirk. "You can destroy me, but you can't wipe out the fact that I've existed, and that I've felt what I felt. Captain Kirk, you can't defeat me."

"Sure I can," he said. "Watch me squash you like a bug."

"I admit you can do that," Human Spock said. "But you still can't win."

"I call that a pretty absolute victory," he said.

"No," Human Spock said. "You can't have the things you want to extort from me. You can't make me admire your cruelty, and you can't make me hate you."

Kirk snapped his fingers. McCoy and Human Spock fell to the deck.

"I have absolute power," he said. "I can make you do anything I want."

"You made me Human," he said. "A tyrant needs hate and fear. I'm not afraid to die, so I don't fear you. And I can't hate you. How can I hate Jim Kirk?"

McCoy tried to push himself up. "He's not Jim Kirk any more. Don't you see that?"

"I see the side of James T. Kirk he keeps hidden even from himself. But I see James T. Kirk," Human Spock said. "Jim -- wherever you are in there -- come out. For your ship. For your friends."

Tiberius reached out mentally for an assist from his creator. There was a most uncomfortable feeling in the soles of his boots, creeping upward through the bones of his legs and spreading through him. Jim had heard and was trying to get out again.

"No!" he cried.

Mitchell, struggling to collect every scrap of inhuman energy he could ferret out, did not heed Tiberius' call.

Tiberius clutched for every foothold he could find in Kirk's mind, driving pitons into his centers of lust, rage, resentment, egoism and arrogance. Jim sank gentle fingers into his love, companionship, gentleness, unselfishness, responsibility, massaging life back into them.

"What's he doing?" McCoy said. "He's just standing there."

"Hardly," Human Spock said. Fighting his fear, he advanced.

Vulcan Spock's eyes widened. "No," he said to the motionless figure of Kirk. "Do not make me go back."

Kirk spread his arms, yanking Vulcan Spock to his side with one hand and taking Human Spock's hands, against both of their wills, and cried over his shoulder to McCoy.

"He's going to make me go back! Doctor, stop him! I can't -- I don't want to--"

The three forms vanished in a halo of greenish-pink light. McCoy shielded his eyes from the radiance. When it passed, and he lowered his arm, there were only two figures. He tensed every muscle to try a leap from the floor, and went hurtling up, fighting a gravity that didn't exist.

Kirk re-opened his eyes. The only glow in the hazel depths was a fleck of violet, the legacy of his maternal grandmother.

Spock glanced down, became aware he was clasping his own hands, and unclasped them.

A hand tapped McCoy on the shoulder. A very disoriented ensign saluted him.

Spock raised an eyebrow at Kirk. "One minute ago, there were four beings in this hall. There are now at least twelve. I believe you might be able to supply an explanation."

"I brought them back," Kirk said. "All four hundred of them. I reduced them to bio-organic energy and put them outside the ship for safe-keeping. Now, I just brought them back."

"Which you?" McCoy said. "Jim, or Tiberius?"

Kirk led his officers down the corridor toward Engineering. "I'm not sure I want to ask that question yet. The party isn't over. I still have a job to do. I'm sorry for what happened. I hope you can trust me enough to come help me do it."

"Reporting for duty," Spock said.

"Good to have you back, Jim," McCoy said warily.

♦♦♦

"We've waited long enough," Loewe said. "Aim."

The glow on the viewscreen of the Avenger died as if someone had thrown an off switch. Square in the middle of the screen, and in Riley's sights, was a perfectly normal Enterprise, navigation lights blinking merrily away, providing the only illumination of her familiar, graceful form.

Vosselaer looked up from his station. "We have to get these monitors checked out, sir. They can't be right. One minute ago there were five humanoids on the ship, and two whatever-the-hells. Now there's one whatsis and four hundred twelve ordinary humanoids," he said.

"Hold your fire," Loewe told Riley.

"With pleasure, sir," Riley said.

"Shall I open hailing frequencies, sir?" Ramirez said.

"I still don't like that one quasi-Human on board. Sit tight. But be ready to ask Jim over for a drink."

♦♦♦

Mitchell sensed his substance crumbling away. The raw energy of dilithium clad his skeleton in simulated flesh, and fueled his purely physical being from unleashing the amoral energy of its unstable atoms.

His overweening demands on the Enterprise had finally depleted her main generators to the point where he could barely maintain his musculature. He recalled enough technical knowledge from his long-gone Humanity and time on the ship to know he could not draw from impulse, or the ship's orbit would decay. He was not sure even his unliving being could survive crashing through the atmosphere.

For a time, the ill-conceived attacks on the Avenger had fed him, but no further tidbits had come in several minute. Even if he had the reserve to board the sister starship, he had neither the time nor incentive to wade again through a Human subconscious and find failings he could use to enslave them. He had to stay put, husband his strength, and fight where he stood.

He had not even enough power left to stick the door shut, and prevent Kirk from entering. A half-dozen technicians, still unsure of where they had been and what they were doing back at their posts, clustered around their commander.

"Gary," Kirk said, and leveled a phaser at him. "Give it up. Leave my ship. Leave my crew alone."

"Go ahead," Mitchell said. "Shoot."

Spock grabbed Kirk's wrist. "That's just what he wants you to do. He feeds on it. You'll make him stronger," he hissed.

Kirk lowered the phaser.

"Go ahead," Mitchell urged. "You hate me. You're dying to strike out at me. Who runs this ship, Kirk? Do you let the Vulcan order you around?"

Kirk tossed the phaser to the floor. "When it's warranted, yes. Maybe I have the greatest power on this ship — the power not to use my power. Face it, Gary, you've lost." He walked to the wall, flipped the intercom, and satisfied himself that it was working. "You can't even block a simple little intra-ship message," he said. "All hands. This is your captain, James Kirk, speaking. Shut down all non-essential activity on all decks. Minimize use of power. I repeat, generate as little energy as possible."

The lights dimmed. Mitchell dimmed as well, and trembled, scrabbling to tap into the ebbing power.

"What are you going to do now?" Mitchell said.

"I'm going to starve you out," Kirk said. "It's up to you. You can either surrender, and go back to wherever you came from and stay there, or you can hook yourself up to the last of our power supply, in which case we all pay the Vulcans a surprise visit at very high velocity."

Mitchell considered his options for a moment, and grinned.

He seemed suddenly to be everywhere, in a gigantic, hellish fireworks display. "We'll all go together, then. Nice seeing you again, boys."

"What's going on?" McCoy said.

"I bluffed, Bones, and I lost," Kirk said.

Mitchell's grin grew wider. Slowly, with the same laborious care he had spent to build his form on the nameless planet, he wrapped his brittle bones in the Enterprise's impulse and life-support reserves.

Watching him tensely, Kirk realized in horror that time was against him. Mitchell might even rebuild himself sufficiently to survive the crash and go on to terrorize Vulcan in spite of their sacrifice.

Mitchell grew, and throbbed, with each slow throb growing an atom more formidable. Then he gasped, and his unliving hands flew to his throat.

Two metal fists fastened themselves to Mitchell's collarbones with bulldog tenacity, and dragged him from the ruins of his crystalline throne.

"My bairns," Scott growled. "My poor bairns. You've wrecked 'em. You get out of my engines!"

"Scotty!" Kirk cried.

"My God! Is that Scott?" McCoy said. "Looks like something out of an old science-fiction story."

"To be precise, Doctor, Rossum's Universal Robot, model #2148A, semi-Humanoid, obsolescent 2076 C.E. Old Earth date.

"I forgot to change him back," Kirk said.

"Scott, get out of there!" McCoy yelled. "It's radioactive!"

Scott shook Mitchell, and with each thrust from Scott's powerful ironclad arms another shard of crystal fell to the floor. "Dinna worry," he grunted. "I'm not Human. No tissue here, just nuts an' bolts, an' of course the urge to kill."

Mitchell was down to an animate skeleton, rattling and thrashing in Scott's grasp. Scott smashed the skull against the wall with one disgusted heave. It shattered into a dozen ivory fragments. He picked up the jawbone and flung it out the waste chute into space.

The lights crept up to half-intensity, then to full ship's day. The comatose Enterprise awakened from its nightmare.

Scott looked at his hands, flesh-and-blood again. Once the witch was dead, the last spell he had cast vanished with him. He hightailed it out of the chamber, one step ahead of the threat of radiation poisoning.

"Get to Sickbay," McCoy said. "Let me check you out."

"The ship comes first," Scott said, looking to Kirk for confirmation. "I've got to get the main drive back on line." He took an anti-radiation lined suit from the supply closet and slipped into it. "Which should be no problem. After all--"

He gestured to the main power chamber. Strewn around the crumbling bones of the would-be conqueror was a glittering crystal fairy ring.

"--he left me all this lovely enriched dilithium, an' it would be a shame not to put it to good use," he said.

The intercom whistled. Kirk punched it, spending all the fury he would have liked the opportunity to vent on Mitchell.

"Sir, communication from the U.S.S. Avenger," Uhura's voice piped in. "Captain Bruce F. Loewe commanding. He wants to know, and I quote, 'what the devil mess you've gotten into now,' unquote, sir."

"Tell him--" Kirk paused. "Tell him I need a drink. And then check out all decks at once. Find out how many of us made it back." He strode into the corridor again, Spock and McCoy dutifully in single file behind him.

The intercom whistled again before he could get halfway to the lift. He stopped to answer. "Kirk here."

"Report on personnel check," she said. "Sensors reveal all hands on board. Nobody missing. I'm running a voice confirmation now."

"Excellent. Kirk out," he answered, and switched off. "Well, gentlemen, it looks like we were fortunate again. No casualties."

Spock stooped to pick up a pair of crumpled khaki coveralls. "Perhaps one, sir," he said. McCoy raised his eyebrow. "Doctor, if I may see you for a private conference?"

♦♦♦

"Mr. Riley," Uhura said, accepting a glass from the young officer, "are you contriving to get me drunk?"

"I thought you might need it," Riley said. "I hope it'll loosen your--" she cast a dark warning glance at him, "--your tongue. After all, I am the one Captain Loewe charged with investigating what happened over there. I've spoken to nerly 200 crewmen so far, and nobody seems to know. As far as I can tell, they were all at their posts, or in bed asleep, or carrying on their normal routine. Then they just ceased to exist. Then just as suddenly they were right back where they were before, several days and one crisis later." He took a gulp of his own drink. "A couple of them have a memory of sorts, of being part of a big, pulsating glob of energy. Nurse Chapel had what she calls a 'vision'."

"Oh? Of what?"

"She isn't sure. For lack of a better word, she said 'a miracle.' Other than that, the whole episode is a blank, because they weren't really around to see it."

"So! I had thought this was a romantic evening. Instead, it's all in the line of duty. Is that it?" she said.

"Well, Sparks, anything you could tell me about this...I hear you weren't one of the ones who vanished. You and Chekov. I spoke to Chekov. He preferred not to talk about it. Very brusque and businesslike. I thought you might be more forthcoming."

She handed the glass back to him. "If we're going to have a debriefing session, Mr. Riley, I would like to do it by the book, not in your quarters. I'm not that kind of girl."

"Hey! Easy, easy!" Riley protested, and held the glass forth again. "Whoever said you might be?"

He was taken aback by her reproachful glare. Then it occurred to him that it might not be meant for him anyway.

Uhura straightened her skirt. "I have no further comment, except for one. Could you possibly arrange papers for me for a transfer to the Avenger as soon as possible?"

"But--" Riley said. "I thought you wanted to re-up with Captain Kirk. I thought you said he was the best damn commander in the fleet."

"He is, he is," she said. "And I am the best damn communications officer. The best way to prove that assertion is to transfer." She took the glass. "Well, I guess it couldn't hurt. Cheers."

♦♦♦

McCoy tilted the diagnostic couch, depositing Spock neatly on his feet. "Well, no permanent damage that I can tell," he said. "Except for Jim himself, you're the last one. I never want to run marathon full physicals on an entire

starship crew again. This has been endless."

Spock pulled on his shirt. "Am I dismissed, Doctor?"

"No, not quite yet. I still have a question or two," he said. Spock lingered at the door. McCoy leaned on the diagnostic bed, which beeped soothingly in time with his metabolism.

"I guess it's absurd," McCoy said at last. "But I have to ask you what happened in that 'private conference' we had after Scotty beat the bejesus out of Mitchell. Did something happen during that little dust-up with Dracula that I ought to know about, and don't?"

"Do not blame me for your creeping senility," Spock said, and smoothed his hair. "I have no idea what you mean."

"Don't give me that cat-that-swallowed-the-canary look," McCoy said.

"Doctor," Spock said with all the dignity he could summon, "I am not a feline, and as a vegetarian, I do not consume fowl."

"Now cut that out! -- you know quite well what I mean. Whatever it was that you told me to 'forget'."

Spock sighed, hoping McCoy would take it for exasperation. If only Kirk, when he reunited Spock's halves, had let him keep the Human power of lying.

"Most of that encounter is a blur to me," McCoy continued. "After-effects of having all those diseases, possibly. But up until a certain point, everything is excruciatingly clear. Then I recall standing with you and Jim, just before Scotty beat Mitchell. I know who Mitchell was, because someone explained it to me. Someone cured me, too, and whoever he is, he did me a favor, because I'm now immune to thirty eight diseases. He's somewhere in that blur. I have the feeling there's something I ought to remember, concerning you in particular -- and whoever this mystery man might have been."

"You have been hallucinating. The result of partaking of your own nostrums, no doubt."

McCoy jumped away from the couch and stood nearly nose-to-nose with Spock. "Now, look here," he said. "I may not remember what you ordered me to forget, but I distinctly remember your giving me that command. Sure, it worked with Jim with no after-effects, but that was because he wanted to forget Reena Kapec. It's harder to tamper with a mind that's resisting you. You managed to make me forget the incident, but not the command." He folded his arms and snuffled indignantly. "So, why don't we just have another little heart-to-heart, and you can tell me what it is you wanted me to forget, hmmm?"

Spock also folded his arms, a mirror-image monolith of stubbornness. "Doctor," he explained as if to a very small child, "if I wished you to know something, I would not request you--"

"Request! You call muscling into my mind, giving me quarter-deck orders a--"

"I said, I would not request you to forget it. This logic should be patently evident even to you, regardless of whether or not I committed such an unethical action, to which I do not admit."

He turned to make a grand exit. McCoy's voice behind him stopped him.

"Very well, Spock, keep your little secrets, see if I care. But never, and I mean never, take the liberty of inviting yourself into my head again. You hear?"

Spock paused. "I assure you, never again. Not even if my life depended on it."

•••

The low, fruity tones of T'Pau's perfectly modulated voice rolled over Nogura and Loewe like a tidal wave of molasses. "You realize," she said, "that Vulcan is in a very difficult position. Very difficult."

Nogura swallowed hard. "Yes, Your Serenity. I can certainly understand that."

"On the one hand," she intoned, "it could plausibly be argued that Captain Kirk has saved Vulcan from a grave danger. This 'Mitchell' creature might well have found his way here, or to another populated planet, without the Enterprise to carry it."

"That's certainly true," Nogura said. He had no idea how else to deal with T'Pau besides agreeing with everything she said, and he didn't want to find out what happened when mere Humans disagreed with her.

"On the other, I understand it was this creature's hatred of Kirk that bought him from his grave and across so many light-years to the Enterprise. And it was the Enterprise that brought him to Vulcan," she said.

Kirk folded his hands over his stomach like the Boddhisatva, and tried to frame a reply that would be both respectful and pointed.

"There is also the matter of damages to Vulcan," T'Pau continued, "owed by the Federation. Since you are its deputized agent, the Federation is responsible for your actions. Vulcan is an unforgiving land, and we have been prepared always for our home to turn against us. We have taken the utmost precautions against fire, duststorms, volcanic eruptions and high-velocity winds." The matriach looked darkly out from under her brows at Kirk. "Of all the weapons you could have used against us, you chose water."

"Now look here!" Kirk snapped. "You Vulcans are spending a fortune on importing, synthesizing and conserving water. Under any other circumstances, you would have been delighted!" His voice shrank to a sheepish whisper. "I guess it would have been your 'heart's desire'."

"Typical Human excess has had devastating consequences," she said. "In the future, please do us no more favors. We cannot blink away the fact of this misdeed."

"We've already said we'll indemnify Vulcan, My Lady," Nogura said. "Not that you need it. With that technological know-how of yours, you're almost back to normal anyway. I see these little mishaps didn't diminish your usual sunny disposition."

"If that is another Human joke, I would prefer to have the rainstorms and tidal waves again."

"If you want an apology," Kirk said, you have it, in spades. But we beat that creature. He won't be back."

"Is that not what you said the last time, Captain Kirk.?"

Kirk hung his head, brooding.

"He survived your first efforts to destroy him. There is no guarantee he has not even now found a new host and begun the process of rebuilding himself," T'Pau said. "If this is so, five years from now, or ten, he will emerge again. And he will most certainly come after you."

"And I'll beat him again," Kirk said, without conviction.

Nogura met T'Pau's unblinking eyes, and turned away to Kirk. "She's right, you know. We can't take that risk. Got alone knows what he'd do next time."

"He's dead!" Kirk protested. "Is everybody crazy here? You can't put my life in the hands of a dead man. Don't I even get a thank-you for defeating him?"

"T'Pau, what am I supposed to do?" Nogura said. "Bust him or decorate him?"

"Both," T'Pau said. "It is clear, with the danger of this Mitchell even remotely possible, you must not allow Kirk to have direct access to any source of power so devastating as a starship. It would be like handing it to Mitchell."

"MY ship," Kirk said. "You can't take my ship!"

"If he returns, it will no longer be your ship."

"So bust me?"

"You deserve credit due you for saving our planet," T'Pau said. "Reviewing your record, I think a promotion is long overdue. You deserve an Admiralty. I shall so recommend," T'Pau said.

Loewe sat up. "You can't do that. Jim here is--" he spread his hands in futility, trying to pull words from the air. "I don't know how to describe it. I love command too, but for me, it's just another job. With Jim here, it's -- his whole life."

"Perhaps if command were not so important to him, he would not have succumbed to this creature's temptations," T'Pau said. "I would prefer a Loewe to a Kirk to be trusted with such a great weapon as a starship and with the lives of others."

Perhaps he will never achieve anything of importance--" Loewe bridled--"but neither will he ever do great harm."

"You're looking for mediocrity?" Kirk said. "Sorry, Butch," he hastily amended, "present company excepted. What is happening to this organization? I thought risk was our business, gentlemen, and lady."

"Please do not rant, Kirk," T'Pol said. "This display of emotion is highly unseemly. Vulcan joined the Federation in the belief that peace was its business. Vulcan, in the interests of its own safety, must demand that this loaded weapon be removed from Kirk's hand. Place him somewhere where he will no longer be an attractive target to Mitchell."

"But--" Nogura said.

"Or Vulcan," T'Pol said, pulling her cloak about her shoulders, "must withdraw from the Federation. These are our terms. Live long and prosper." With a crinkling of starched skirts and clank of ornaments, she lifted herself from the chair, and motioned Nogura's aide to summon her litter.

"Is this the thanks I get?" Kirk said.

"Anyone else would take it as a lucky break, Jim. Look at it this way. You're being jumped right over the head of old Ian Finnegan. He's been bucking for admiral for three years. I'd love to see his face."

"I'll get her back," Kirk said. "If it takes me twenty years, I'll get her back."

♦♦♦

Dinner passed quietly at the home of Sarek. Four were expected at the table, but Amanda, hopeful to the last, had ordered a fifth place set between herself and Commander Hatfield.

Sarek lifted the lid on the main course. "Spock's favorite, I see."

Amanda heaped Sarek's plate with a rainbow of wilted vegetables, and poured sauce on it. "I thought he might want one last home-cooked meal before leaving. They don't serve meals like this on Mount Seleya."

"They do not serve anything on Mount Seleya," Sarek said. "He must learn to fend for himself. Moreover, he must learn to disdain such fleshly pleasures. This is what the Kolinahr is, my wife."

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'll never understand it. Soup, Commander?"

"No, thanks," Hatfield said. "I'll whip up something later."

Sarek pushed his plate aside. "No doubt. I wish you would not plan your menu at the table, or shield your thoughts more vigorously. It perturbs my stomach to try to consume my own dinner when you are filling my head with images of hamburgers and mayonnaise."

"My Lord," Hatfield said timidly. "Spock...will he ever come back?"

"Not as you know him," Sarek said. "He will come back when he has become what he must become. A Vulcan."

Amanda pushed her own plate aside as well. "Then I suppose you win, husband," she said.

"No," Hatfield said. "Nobody wins. Everybody loses. You don't get a son in the Science Academy. Amanda doesn't even get a grandchild. I don't get what might have been, either."

I could perhaps have loved a whole human, she thought. This is twice in one lifetime I've seen a man I loved vanish into non-existence. The famous family luck is holding up.

"Your thoughts are very strong," Amanda said discreetly. "Even I can pick them up." She dropped her voice low. Sarek pretended to address his dessert. "Do you think you could have learned to love a whole Spock?"

"I'll never know now," Hatfield said. She stood, dropped her crumpled napkin on her seat, and excused herself with a curtsy.

"Humans," Sarek said. "I shall never understand any of them." He reached for Amanda's hand across the table. "Except perhaps for one."

Saavik chose that moment to tip over her highchair in quest of Hatfield's

untouched dessert. The tureen of plomik soup overturned, soaking the ambassador's sleeve and trimming it with bits of soggy green and yellow garnish.

"Perhaps, my lady," he said as he blotted his robe with the tablecloth, "we are more blessed in our adversity, if it means Spock will not be presenting us with grandchildren."

♦♦♦

Time and decay continued to watch over the dead, the living and the sleeping impartially. It was the thirteenth day of the fifth season of the seventh year of the planet that no longer orbited a distant star at the edge of the galaxy.

"Stardate 9807.83," Kirk dictated. "James Tiberius Kirk--"

McCoy shivered.

"James Kirk," the admiral-elect amended. "Enterprise en route to Starbase Two to participate in investiture of new admiral and transfer of command. Proceeding on schedule, estimated time of arrival four hours, Kirk out." He switched off the recorder.

"Curt," McCoy said.

"Short and sweet," Kirk answered. "I'll leave the oratory to Nogura. I think it's bad taste at any wake for the guest of honor to deliver the eulogy, don't you?"

McCoy essayed a laugh, which emerged stillborn. "I'm surprised you'd let a bunch of Vulcans railroad you. I'm starting to wonder if you're the man I thought you were."

"Maybe I'm not," Kirk said. "Maybe Nogura and T'Pol have a point. All the way back in ancient Greece, Plato knew enough to recommend that of all the people in the state to choose as king, the one man who must never get the job is the one who wants it. Oh, I knew I had my faults, Bones. But never, never before, have I ever turned on my own men that way. Maybe I can't be trusted."

"I won't even bother repeating that old saw about absolute power corrupting absolutely," McCoy said.

"You just did."

"Oh. Well, anyway, it's your funeral. In a couple of months, once this little crisis of confidence has passed, you'll be clawing at the hangar door, trying to get back on the Enterprise. I know you."

"Yes," Kirk said. "You do know me. You've seen the worst of me, anyway. Bones, if I did get her back, would you be coming back too?"

"My commission's up. It's in the hands of my superiors."

"I can fix it for you. I'm an admiral now. I can do anything I want."

McCoy shivered again. "I've already made arrangements. I'm booked for New Yonada."

"I see," Kirk said coolly. "Uhura, Spock, and now you too. And Chekov wouldn't tell me to my face, but scuttlebutt has it he's putting in for the Reliant. You're all afraid of me now, aren't you?"

"It was a rough trip home, Jim. Give us all time to heal," McCoy said. "A few months, and who knows?"

"Who knows, indeed...?" Kirk said.

The two men avoided each other's eyes by turning to the vistas of the observation deck. Vast realms of peril and promise lay spread before them. Each felt a separate, subtle twinge of pity that the other would be facing that emptiness alone from now on.

"Oh, look," McCoy said conversationally. "A shooting star. Back in the old days, that was an omen. Usually portended the fall of a king."

Kirk nodded glumly.

The tiny glittering particle of unliving matter hurtled on for another four light-days before impacting upon a tiny world at the edge of the galaxy, foresaken by any gods that might rule there, and undiscovered by men. It passed undamaged through the thin atmosphere and lodged in a crystalline mountain, with a thud audible to no sentient being on the nameless world except for itself; lodged, and

offered a broken grimace to indifferent skies.

It was the first day of the first season of the first year of the planet without a name.



Absent Friends



Admiral Kirk picked up his jacket, and thrust his left arm into the right sleeve.

Commander Scott was rolling up the sad little paper banner over the bar: "Reunion, U.S.S. Enterprise officers, third tour." He overheard his friend and commander's frustrated muttering. "Here, let me help ye wi' that, sir," he said, and tugged at the sleeve.

"Damn new fangled designs," Kirk said. "That's all admirals seem to be good for nowadays, redesigning these get-ups every couple of years."

"Present company excepted, Scott said.

"No, Scotty," Kirk said. "Nobody excepted. The council thinks it keeps us out of trouble, I guess. Maybe it does." He put his finger through the armpit lining and cursed in Aldeberan. Scott's little nephew Peter had sneaked out of bed for his fifteenth glass of water and was peeping out from behind the hallway arch, and he didn't want to disillusion the adoring child.

"I'm rather partial to the old model mysel'," Scott sighed. "All the pretty colors." He smoothed the wrinkles out of Kirk's wide epaulets. "But it didn't look quite so nice wi' all the medals pinned to it, though."

Kirk finally adjusted the proper arms in the proper sleeves, and looked the very model of a modern Starfleet admiral. "Yes," he said. "They do love pinning medals on each other. But no matter how often they redesign this thing, sooner or later they're going to run out of places to pin them. There are just so many spots on the Humanoid anatomy to stick a medal." His eyes narrowed to gleeful, blurry slits. "I know where I'd like to stick 'em."

Scott wandered around the room, scooping uneaten hors d'oeuvres off trays and dumping them into the reprocessor. "I imagine ye do, sir. What wi' rubbin' elbows with 'em every day an' all. Ye maun get a wee bit disgusted."

"Ach, dinna remind me o' tha'," Kirk laughed. "Really, after all these years in the service, I'd've thought you'd learn to speak English." He slapped Scott on the back. "It's been a great evening, old man."

"Sir, I wish ye wouldna call me that. We're neither of us old yet, I hope."

"Let's not let each other get old. Let's not wait another five years to get together."

"My home's your home," Scott said. "That is, when anybody's in it. But seein' as how they keep me hopping all over the place, trouble-shootin' every scow

in the skies..." He knit his eyebrows and peered out slyly from under them. "I dinna suppose ye could pull a few strings for an old friend?"

Kirk's boozy good humor acquired a sudden edge. "I can't even get her back for myself, Scotty," he said. "Oh, there isn't any official rule anymore. Nobody's willing to tell me directly I can't have her, now T'Pau is dead. But all my requests get strangled in red tape, or routed to a starbase three dozen light years away, or lost, and next time they'll probably tell me the dog ate it, or fairies took it." He fell back into the nearest chair and drummed his knees. "In all of this man's army, nobody is willing to tell me to my face, 'No, you can't have your ship.' Am I the only man with any guts?"

Scott pursed his lips. It looked alarmingly like he was never going to get Kirk to leave. "Weren't you on your way home, sir?" he said, as delicately as he could.

"That's the problem," Kirk said. "I have only one home, and they threw me out." He threw out his chest, upon which glinted a nebula of medals. "Look at this junkheap. I am now the most decorated, admired, respected and prominent displaced person in the galaxy."

And also the drunkest, Scott thought as he grasped Kirk's elbow. "Here, sir. Let me call you a cab."

"A cab?" Kirk belched. "I remember when you trusted me to fly a thousand-foot starship, with 400 souls aboard her, from one end of the galaxy to the other at warp eight. Now you don't even trust me to get myself across town in a miserable little Andromeda XV?"

"Wi' all due respect," Scott said.

"You're right," Kirk sighed. "You always are. Thank God there's at least one thing that never changes. Call. I didn't get this far to die in a wretched traffic accident now."

Scott lifted the pager and pressed Security with a relieved sigh.

"Seeing as how I'm not driving, Scotty, why don't you mix me one more Atomsmasher for the road? A last toast to absent friends?"

"Just a wee one."

Kirk accepted the glass, raised it to clink against Scott's, and studied the murky liquid. "I used to know someone who mixed the best Atomsmashers in the fleet. And someone else who never missed a chance to reprimand him for inflicting them on me while we were on duty. Scotty, I wasn't going to ask, but--"

"I dinna know, sir. They didn't reply, not even to decline. Nary a word."

"They know where I am!" Kirk burst out. "Everybody in the damn universe knows where I am." He slammed his glass down on the table, so hard that the drink spilled, eating the veneer with an evil fizz and a wisp of acrid smoke. "Not a visit, not a call. No 'how are you,' or 'I miss you,' or even 'drop dead.'"

The big engineer's features furrowed with affection and pity. Glancing at him, Kirk thought for a second he would curl up like a large faithful sheepdog at his master's feet. "Ye have to understand them," he said. "They are not so far from yourselves. They are both verra stubborn men. Ye know what it's like to be a Vulcan. An' as for...him, where he comes from they're still flyin' the stars and bars an' talking about President Jefferson Davis. They just don't surrender easy." He glanced at the picture of Robert the Bruce over the mantel. "Bein' a little in that line myself, I understand."

"I don't," Kirk said. "I'm ready for anything they have to say to me. Hard words are nothing new."

"Ye may be less ready than you think," Scott said. "Are ye really ready to hear, 'Jim, you were right'?"

Kirk shook his head, and the two gazed out the window, waiting for the cab.

♦♦♦

McCoy's first impulse was to brush away whatever was tugging at his sleeve. But when he reached down, tiny Humanoid fingers wrapped themselves around his wrist.

"Oh, it's only you, Khouri," he said. "For a moment, you gave me a start." He swiveled the chair and hauled the child onto his lap. "Now you know I told you never to disturb me while I'm spectroanalyzing enzyme components of pseudo-microbial infestations."

"Mother wants to speak to you," the child said, and waved toward the doorway, where Natira already stood. Still tall and gorgeous and almost every inch a woman, McCoy thought, and beckoned to her to enter.

He lifted the boy off his lap and spanked him gently on the haunches. "Run along and play and shut the door behind you, please."

Natira smiled, her face a mask of masterful serenity. McCoy knew the look. At any second rage would cross her face like a sudden summer storm. "I am pleased to see that your work has progressed so well. I am less pleased to hear that you are considering leaving us."

"Oh, so Horvask mentioned that, did he?"

"If you wish to keep secrets," she said, "you must not tell them to Horvask. It is unheard of among the Fabrini for a husband to keep secrets from his wife."

McCoy leaned on the desk and waved a nonchalant hand in her direction. "Just one more example, I guess, of how lousy I would have been as a Fabrini husband." Fabrini, he thought, have almost as little sense of humor as Vulcans. He smiled, hoping she would pick up on the cue. She did not, so he met her tight-lipped, steel-eyed glare with an equally hostile look. "Besides, I recollect that it didn't work the other way around, did it?"

"That was not my fault," Natira said. Her regal composure faltered. "It should have occurred to you to examine me. You are a physician. You should have--"

"We've been all over this before, too many times," he said. "I had other things to think about. For one thing, I was dying. For another you and your entire spaceship were due to crash. And for a third..."

"Yes?"

He turned away. "Dammit, don't make me say it. You know it."

"I wish to hear it."

"I was in love with you. Remember?"

"I fear I suffered the same affliction," she said, and laid a hand on his shoulder. He brushed it off petulantly. She replaced it, and would not be moved. "You cured your disease. You saved my people. But with all your learning, this is an affliction of which you have not cured me."

"It doesn't matter."

"It does. Does it not please McCoy any more? Do you remember when you first came to Yonada? Someday we will make it as we desired it to be."

"No, we won't!" he said. "Stop feeling sorry for me. Keeping me round here like some kind of pet, and you know that's all I can ever be to you. I could no more be a husband to you than to a Horta, for all your Human-looking curves. So get back to your husband, and do whatever it is you and Horvask do with whatever it is you do it with, and send 'Uncle Leonard' lots more little nephews and nieces to tug at his shirtsleeve. Ok?"

Her grip tightened, and he winced. Lord, she's strong, and she runs this place, he thought.

"I have asked the Oracle," she said.

"Natira, you know it's only a load of microchips and circuits. Not a god."

"As long as I am high priestess, it will remain a god," she said. "Although fortunately it is a god I have learned to program. It decrees whatever laws I ask of it, by my convenience. It is by the moral authority of the Oracle that I allow you to walk among our people and have access to the sacred writings of our ancestors," she said. "Among our people, only the high priestess is permitted to choose her mate."

"I know," McCoy said.

"I have revised the program of the Oracle to expand this decree. The high priestess may choose more than one mate, if she desires. Would that please McCoy?"

"Oh, great. One big happy family. You, me and Horvask. Among my people,

most of us still take them one at a time. And you can't order the compu -- Oracle -- to correct that little, ah, anatomical practical joke nature played on us."

She bent and kissed his cheek. "The Oracle knows many things. It held the wonders of the universe when your own people did not even know to make fire. It may hold within it the miracle that will overcome this problem as well. It brought you back to life. It will surely bring us together."

"If I haven't found it in all this time, it isn't in there. There are some things science can't overcome."

Her fingers were almost drawing blood through his lab coat. A woman who orders her god around isn't going to take no for an answer from me, he thought. It suddenly dawned on him he had not even considered what she might do if he rejected her again.

"All right," he said. "I'll keep trying."

She danced across the room, in a flash as bright, merry and harmless as one of her own children, and vanished gracefully around the corner.

"Shut the door, please," he called, and was rewarded with a slam. Well, you've brought yourself a couple more years of this, he thought, and hunched over his spectroscope. Sooner or later, you have to make her believe.

He himself had not wanted to believe. But not even Natira's implacable devotion could change facts. There was no miracle, not even in the annals of the Fabrini, to make it possible for a vegetable, however sophisticated and Human-seeming, to mate with a Human. He had never told her, either, that the wonderful cure for xenopolycythemia that had saved his life had been developed, not for the Fabrini people themselves, but for their livestock.

I've been in worse spots, I guess, then to be a pet Human for a bunch of houseplants. Jim tried to warn me.

"Jim," he said, "you were right." And he plunged back into his work.

•••

Spock sank bruised, raw fingers into the dust and sifted it, glorying in its fleeting warmth. Once the sun went down on Mount Seleya, vicious winds pummelled anything left exposed to the evening's vengeance. His only hope for survival was to dig a hole, bury himself in the warm dirt, and shield his face with his cloak, waiting again for the relentless sun to rise.

A gust blew much of his painstakingly accumulated mound back into the hole. He set to scooping it out again.

This is intended to teach the acolyte something very important, he thought. Otherwise it would not have been included since the time of Surak in the ritual of the Kolinahr. It must be a sign of my own unworthiness that I cannot fathom what it is meant to teach.

He ran, as logically as he could with the dusty winds lashing his back, through the list of possibilities. Endurance? No. Vulcans are born with endurance. A flying stone tore through his flimsy cloak and lodged in his arm, drawing blood. Stoicism, then. No. Vulcans who have never dared to contemplate following the rigors of Kolinahr -- and who, he realized, would always be considered more truly Vulcan in their failure than he at the pinnacle of his accomplishment -- even these accept destiny and are serene in the face of her mockery.

He clapped his hand over his eyes, too late to ward off a barrage of wind-borne, white-hot pebbles. Then he clapped his other hand over his mouth and bit it. Even in the wilderness, he would not show weakness. If his were the only ears to hear his cries of pain, that would be one pair too many.

Ingenuity, then? Obviously not. I must follow the ritual to the letter, as generations followed it before me. I must dig this hole to precisely twenty-five handspans deep, forty handspans long, and twenty handspans wide. I must begin digging at exactly the instant the sun crossed the midpoint of the horizon, and complete it the instant the corona disappears behind the peak. I must lie in it until the midpoint of the sun precisely crosses the horizon tomorrow. If I do otherwise, however logical my course of action may be, I will have failed and I

shall be sent away in disgrace. And yet, how futile and primitive, for a race whose ships conquer the stars and whose clever machines conquer the planet, to dig holes.

He squatted and sized up the hole. Perhaps it is meant to teach me the elegance of precision, he thought. The hole was five handspans wider at the top than at the bottom, too deep in the middle, too shallow at the sides, and rapidly filling up again with dust. Or the impossibility of precision.

Pockets of wind around him animated small dust-devils, dancing at his feet as savages around a sacrificial victim. He plunged head first into the hole, in anticipation of the battering tornadoes such small stones inevitably heralded. He raised his head, blinking away tears that he was sure were due to dust and nothing more.

Now I understand what this is meant to teach, he thought. Humility.

"Jim," he said. "You were right."



IN SEARCH OF AUTHORS

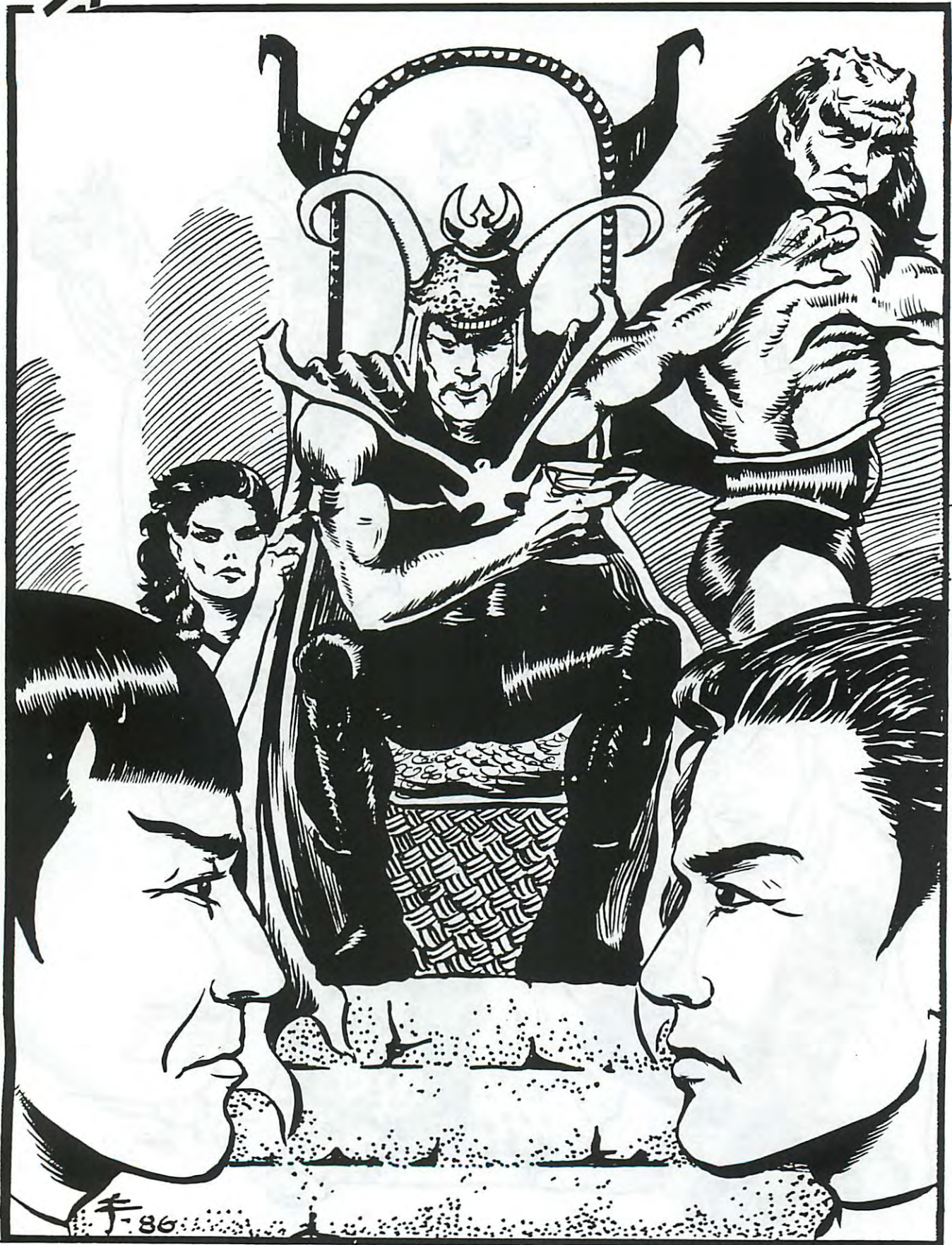


From hither and yon we've accumulated a variety of "orphan illustrations" in our files. Rather than allow them to languish any longer, we're printing them here in the hope that they will inspire some authors to create something — story, poem, essay, whatever — to match. Accepted entries will be published in Tal 10, and receive a nice surprise as a bonus.

Send submissions to either KIM KNAPP, 3023 Travera Dr SE, Port Orchard WA 98366 or to VEL JAEGER, 1324 Stratford Dr, Clearwater FL 34616.

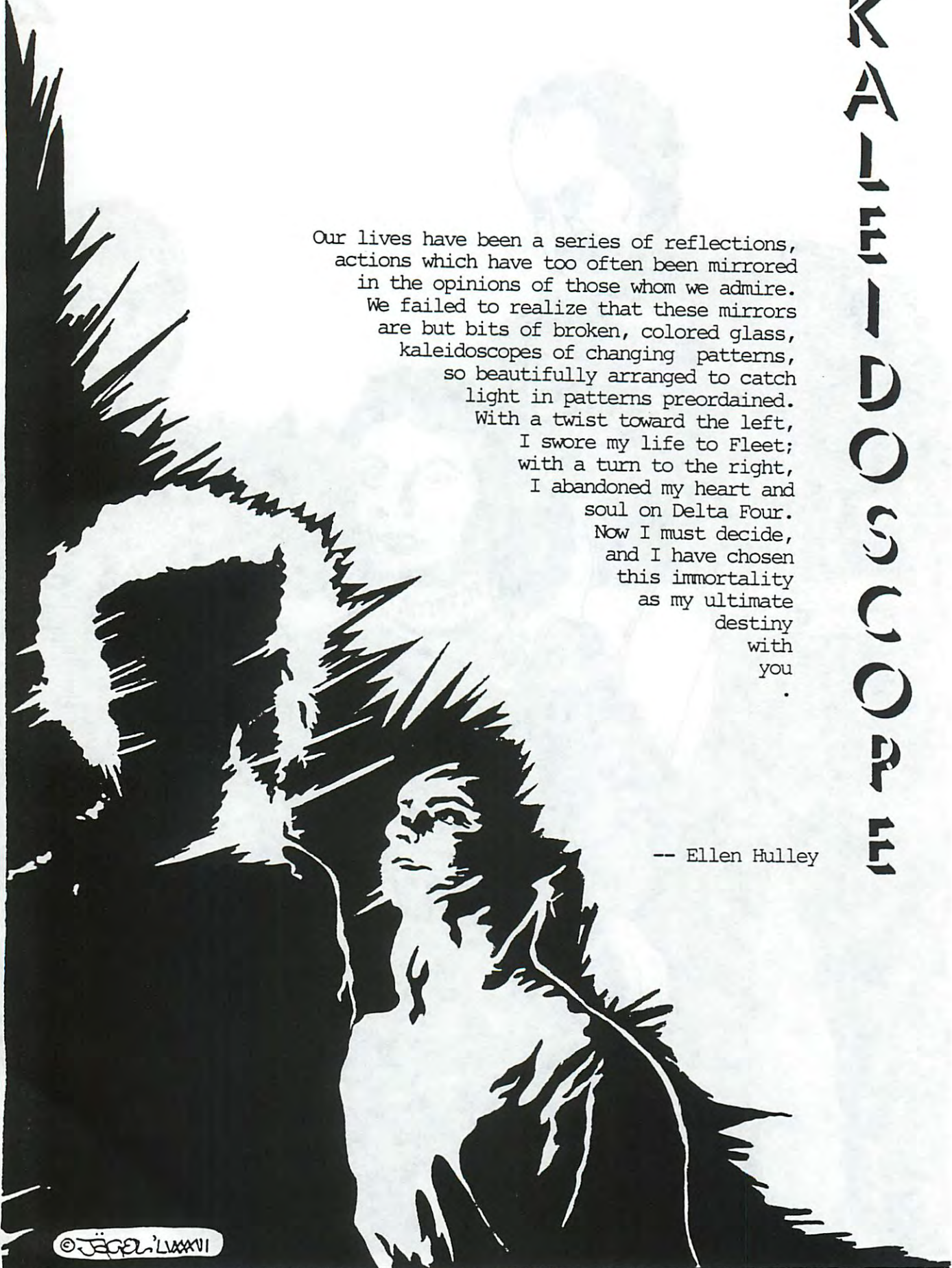


3.





KALEIDOSCOPE



Our lives have been a series of reflections,
actions which have too often been mirrored
in the opinions of those whom we admire.
We failed to realize that these mirrors
are but bits of broken, colored glass,
kaleidoscopes of changing patterns,
so beautifully arranged to catch
light in patterns preordained.
With a twist toward the left,
I swore my life to Fleet;
with a turn to the right,
I abandoned my heart and
soul on Delta Four.
Now I must decide,
and I have chosen
this immortality
as my ultimate
destiny
with
you
.

-- Ellen Hulley

A FATAL HONOR

BY KIM KNAPP

Amid the creak of metal the echoes of the blast finally died away, and Joachim slowly became aware of the heavy weight of the inner hull fragment pressing into him. Pain assaulted his awareness, and he knew that there would be no more tomorrows. He forced it aside as he heard Khan's footsteps, but gagged with a new wave of agony as the thick metal slab was pulled away. He felt blood in his belly, and his vision hazed. Time suddenly crawled as he saw the chronometer slow to a leisurely voyage, seconds moving like sluggish hours.

"Joachim!" It was Khan. His pain and desperation hoarse in his throat. The word sounded slurred.

With an effort, Joachim forced his eyes up to meet the hopeful ones above him. He saw with relief that the madness had left them, the bitter hatred faded away. His mind slipped back to the first days, their youthful idealism, their dedication, their completeness of purpose.

♦♦♦

Khan had wanted to begin the new order with inspired leadership. They would lead Earth to a new level of achievement, to a new position. Khan and his followers would perfect the faster-than-light drive, would help their race achieve the stars.

And when humanity moved to the stars, Khan would be there to lead them. His research, conducted in hidden laboratories, had begun to open insights into the problems of aging. As "genetic supermen," Khan and his elite were longer-lived than the average human, but Khan wanted more, wanted it all. He wanted to live forever.

Joachim dismissed it as megalomania, but had secretly wondered if this was the chink in the perfection of Khan's seemingly impervious armor.

Their dreams of glory had ended as none of them had foreseen. They had to flee for their lives in the sleeper ship rudely named "Botany Bay" by Khan in one of his more satirical moods. Joachim had gone to his hibernation nervously in spite of his trust in Khan, wondering if he would ever waken. Fortunately, his sleep had been dreamless. Joachim, although acknowledged as Khan's second-in-command and the one closest to being his equal, possessed something that none of the others seemed to suffer with — a conscience. In order to save himself, he had to hide it, had to pretend that the atrocities he saw affected him as little as they appeared to bother the others.

When Khan had wakened his followers and taken them to the Enterprise, he had been obsessively optimistic, determined to succeed in this new century. But Joachim had questioned even as he followed orders. This was a new time, a new culture. Perhaps Khan would not be so effective here.

They had been successful at first, true enough, but Joachim had still had his doubts. And they had proved to be justified doubts. McGivers, the woman Khan had chosen as his, betrayed him. But, she had redeemed herself — in Khan's eyes — by choosing to accompany him into exile. To Joachim, betrayal was simply that and no more, not to be excused or forgiven. On the planet, settling into their new world, Marla had supported Khan, and had been aware enough of her own limitations to know that she could not enter the decision-making processes of their people. He saw her

dilemma and remained aware of it: in Starfleet, McGivers was one of the elite of the Federation, intelligent and talented enough to be assigned to a starship. In the culture she was suddenly thrust into, she was a second-class citizen, her only rights as Khan's possession. In Khan's absence, she was treated accordingly, and rarely spoken to civilly.

When Marla had died in screaming, shuddering agony, Khan had been devastated, realizing only then how much he had loved her. And when they had done a crude autopsy and found the half-grown ceti-eel snuggled in the gnawed recesses of her brain, he had gone mad. The little colony had survived, although it had not been easy, even with the additional knowledge Khan had gained from scanning the ship's library while in the Enterprise sickbay.

From that day forward, although actively working for the survival of the group, Khan's edge had been blunted, his eyes usually clouded over with the hatred and bitter grief that he had never managed to express, even in private. Joachim had watched Khan carefully, knowing that unless the older man died, he could do nothing — his oath prevented him from taking action against the man he had chosen to obey without question. And when Chekov and the possibility of rescue had stumbled into their lives, Joachim had worried that Khan would abandon his original goal and think only of revenge. His worry was well-founded.

Kirk, the former captain of the Enterprise, had been uppermost in Khan's thoughts. Revenge notwithstanding, Khan had pursued the idea of Genesis, seeing the potential for power in the life-creating process.

It had gone so horribly wrong. The emptied computer banks at the research station, the absence of the Genesis materials, the unwillingness of the few remaining scientists and staff members to talk — none of it had fit into their plans. For the moment, Khan had given up his pursuit of Genesis in order to confront Kirk.

But even that had gone wrong. Joachim relived his stunned astonishment when the console of the Reliant had refused his orders, had lowered the shields and kept them down. They were struck quickly, and only Joachim forcibly holding Khan back had allowed the Reliant to retreat to comparative safety. He trembled inwardly at the memory. He had come so close to breaking his oath — he had almost challenged Khan's competency to lead them. Based on Khan's suicidal actions, he might have won — but for the others, who had sworn similar oaths. He could not know what they were thinking.

And when they had entered the Mutara Nebula in pursuit of Enterprise, he had challenged — by reducing speed at his own initiative.

They had all known, from that moment, that should they survive, Joachim would dispute Khan's leadership. It would never happen, now.

♦♦♦

Joachim returned to the present, to see Khan unchanged above him. He felt his own life ebbing away, and realized that he had to make a decision. He, Joachim, was dying. Nothing could stop that. But perhaps Khan could escape, could salvage his own life from this situation.

Bile rose in his throat as he realized that he had no choice. He was dying, bitterly betrayed by the one he had trusted and loved, one who had sheltered him, taught him, and treated him like a brother. He would not pull Khan down into this morass of anger and despair, would not let him realize that he had put aside every good and hopeful ideal — had sacrificed his followers and friends for a vicious, senseless revenge.

No. He would lie, die with betrayal on his lips, and hope that Khan would choose not to waste his own life as well.

"Yours . . . is the superior . . ." he gasped out. His body went limp, his sight began to blacken, but not before he saw Khan's features harden, the vengeful glint return to his eyes.

Bitter regret for their wasted lives washed over him as the final blackness took him.



RIPPLE EFFECT

BY LEIGH CASKEY

Quiet. That's what shore leave means to me, thought Dr. Christine Chapel as she left Sickbay and headed toward the main rec room. With the Maxwell orbiting Starbase 2, only a minimal crew was left on board to supervise the scheduled overhaul. Most of the crew had fled to experience the pleasures of an extended R&R as soon as the starship had limped into port. They had completed nine months of patrol duty on the edge of the Omega Beta V sector, an area claimed by both the Romulans and a newly established Andorian colony.

As she walked through the silent, almost deserted halls, Chapel amended her thought, a smile playing across her features. Quiet and space, that's what shore leave means to me. Or at least until they start showing up in Sickbay with residual R&R. That reminded her of McCoy, and with the southern doctor came other memories.

It had been eight years ago this month since she had left the Enterprise. Chapel had requested transfer following the Veger incident, and the papers had been processed almost immediately — doctors willing to go anywhere were always in demand in Starfleet. She had been assigned to teach at Starfleet Medical on Deneva, but the years on the Enterprise had left their mark — it was space she loved. After teaching two years, Chapel requested return to fleet duty. Her next assignment was on the Constitution, but her duty on the Enterprise had not prepared her for the boredom of milk runs. A sense of usefulness and challenge were what Chapel craved, events that kept her busy all day and too tired to think at night.

Four years ago the position of Chief Medical Officer opened up on the Maxwell and Chapel pulled every string she could find to get it. She had never regretted her decision. Patrol duty was everything she hoped it would be, the days long but rewarding. Chapel was needed as she never had been on the Constitution.

Entering the main rec room, she took a seat in front of the holo-screen and punched up the news channel. Leaning back in her chair, Chapel tried to remember the last time she had been able to get a seat in the crowded facility — not that she spent a lot of time in the rec room, but it was nice not to have to sit on the floor.

"What's so amusing, Chris?"

Chapel looked up to discover she had been joined by the Maxwell's engineering and weapons officer, Niles Connery. "This is the first time I've been able to see both the eyes and ears of the news anchor since the last time the captain gave shore leave," Chapel replied, gesturing at the empty area in front of the screen.

Smiling, Connery sat down beside her. "It does seem to get crowded in here during the runs. What are we watching?"

"Just the news. I've got nine months of 'who did what to whom when' to catch up on. The only thing I really miss on the deep patrols is news."

"I noticed your name wasn't on the shore leave roster ... are you planning on staying with the ship?"

"I hadn't really thought about it. We are getting some new equipment in Sickbay and I want to be here when it's installed."

"Didn't that come in earlier today?" Connery rose and walked over to the kitchen-servo. Reaching for a second cup, he asked, "Want some coffee?"

"Coffee? Always. Yeah, the new full-body spectro came, but I'm still waiting for the bells and whistles to hook it into the main med computer and life-scan panel."

"So, are you going to take any shore leave at all? How about a quick trip down to the base, just to see how the other half lives?"

Taking the cup from his hand, Chapel took a deep swallow -- and then remembered why she stopped drinking coffee aboard ship during shore leave. This stuff had the consistency and taste of something out of the antimatter coolant system. "Ugh, who's in charge of the kitchen, or has this stuff been sitting around since the cook left yesterday?"

"It does seem a little ... thick," commented Connery as he returned to the seat next to her. "But what about shore leave? Shall I put you down for tomorrow?"

"I don't know -- I'll check on the equipment delivery schedule and let you know ..." Over the past several months the engineering officer had been a frequent visitor to Sickbay -- and not in the professional sense. He was pleasant enough and Chapel liked him but ... Why can't he take a hint?

Chapel's private life had been just that -- private, and when she admitted it to herself, almost non-existent. She had loved Roger Korby and she had lost him. She had loved Spock, but she had reached the conclusion long ago that she had never had him to lose. Relationships were something she had decided to avoid. And, she thought, as she stared into the holo-screen, not wanting the conversation to continue, relationships are not an area in which I've had a lot of success.

"Chapel, we've been out in the wasteland of space for nine months. You're supposed to want to kick up your heels and have fun. In fact, I'm sure it's what the doctor should order for herself ... Chris ... Chris??"

She had heard little, if any, of Connery's prescription. Her entire attention was focused on the holo-screen. The scene on the viewer showed the outside of Starfleet Headquarters in San Francisco on Earth.

".... Starfleet announced today the death of Captain Spock 'Xtmprsqzntwlf b of Vulcan while on a routine Starfleet Academy training mission. Further details will be released at the press conference to be held at 1600 Earth Standard Time this afternoon. We will continue to bring you bulletins as Starfleet releases the information. Once more, Captain Spock of Vulcan has died in an accident aboard the Enterprise. For more details stay tuned for our special coverage beginning immediately following the"

Oh my god, oh my god. DEAD. Chapel pulled her eyes away from the screen and tried to maintain some outward appearance of calm, of control.

"Chris ... Chris ... Chapel!!"

It's got to be a mistake. How could he be dead?

"Chris, are you all right? You look a little pale. Coffee that bad?"

God, that his death could effect me like this after all this time. "My first space assignment was on the Enterprise."

"That's right, I remember now. You were on board during that Veger incident. Did you know Captain Spock?"

"I knew him in the way everyone aboard a ship knows everyone else. I was just a green lieutenant, I guess I thought ... I mean every lieutenant expects the command rank to be invincible, right?" Shut up, Chris, you're sounding like a fool. Just get up and leave. "Well, I guess I'd better get back to work ... see

if any shore leave casualties have shown up early." She walked rapidly toward the exit.

"Hey, want me to put you down for shore leave?" Connery had gotten up and was following her to the door.

"Shore leave?" God, I've got to get out of here.

"I'm going tomorrow afternoon. Want me to put you down in the same party?"

"Whatever ... yeah ... sure." Her fingernails were digging into her palm as she tightened her grip on the handle of the coffee cup.

"I'll see you tomorrow about 1300, okay?"

"Sure, fine." Chapel finally made it out into the hall. Walk — just walk.

Hours seemed to pass before she reached her quarters. Locking the door behind her, Chapel crossed quickly to her desk, putting down the cup she still held, then sliding into the chair in front of the viewer in one easy motion. She pulled the viewer into a more comfortable position and began to call up information. Her fingers felt clumsy and slow. The viewer appeared blurred, the keyboard felt slick, and Chapel discovered she was crying.

For the first time she used the override codes that came with command rank, which allowed her access to normally restricted computer files. Calling on all the tricks Uhura taught her, she patched into the Starfleet communication network. Once in the system, she initiated a search for all the information she could find on Spock's death.

Hours went by before she had exhausted all the sources available to her. The tears had come and gone and come again before she leaned back, looking at the screen. It was true. It was undeniable. He was dead.

Reaching down, Chapel opened the bottom drawer of her desk and pulled out a bottle of unopened Saurian brandy. It was the bottle McCoy had sent when she graduated from medical school and had been assigned to her first CMO post on the Enterprise. Since she really didn't really like brandy, it had been moved here and there around the galaxy as she traveled from ship to ship, assignment to assignment. Somehow it seemed appropriate to open it now. Besides, for the first time in her life, Chapel actually believed she needed a drink.

Quickly finishing the remains of the substance in her coffee cup, she poured in some brandy. Chapel looked carefully at the bottle and poured again, this time filling the cup half full. Taking a deep breath she took a drink and gasped. How can Len drink this stuff? She felt like someone phasered her throat and then dropped a proton torpedo into her stomach.

Chapel spent the next few minutes relearning how to breathe, and tried a smaller sip. The brandy still burned, but not like the first taste. Her thoughts turned back in time to her first days on the Enterprise.

Memories of that first five year mission flashed through her mind. Kirk seated on the bridge, Len working in Sickbay, Sulu fencing in the gym, Uhura singing in the rec room, and through all the visions was the presence of Spock. Since she had made the decision to leave the Enterprise eight years ago Chapel had forced all thought of Spock and her feeling toward him to the farthest reaches of her consciousness. She had worked hard to put those memories and dreams away. Now she allowed them to surface.

Eight years ago when Spock returned to the Enterprise during the Veger incident, Chapel realized that time and medical school had not changed her feelings toward the Vulcan. Unable to face another tour of duty on the Enterprise with her unrequited feelings, she had requested a transfer.

Carefully, Chapel brought forth every memory she had of the Vulcan and relived them — from the very first time she literally ran into him, carrying a box of medical supplies into the lab on her first day aboard the Enterprise, to the sickbay after his encounter with Veger, to the holo-news presentation on his most recent science award; each was examined, relived, and put away.

In the privacy of her own quarters, she said aloud the words she had often thought and had tried to block out for the past eight years. "I loved you so much. God, I really did love you."

Bringing the coffee cup to her lips, Chapel drained the last of the brandy. Returning the bottle to its place in the bottom drawer desk, she laid her head on her arms and cried.

•••

The new day came too quickly. Not used to drinking, Chapel found this morning very different indeed. Waking brought not only a new day to be faced, but also memories of the previous evening. The rough edge of her initial grief was dulled; sleep, and perhaps the brandy, had helped.

She turned over on her back and placed her arm over her closed eyes. As she lay there trying to decide what to do next, the intercom buzzed for her attention. God, was it always so loud? Chapel wondered as she stumbled over to her desk.

Hitting the audio only switch, she answered, "Chapel here."

"Dr. Chapel ... Chris, good morning. We received word that the rest of your medical equipment will not be arriving for a minimum of two standard days."

"Connery?"

"Yes, Chris."

"Thanks." The conversation was taking a lot of effort on her part; Chapel hoped it was finished.

"Chris ... as long as we're scheduled for shore leave at the same time, why don't I just meet you about 1300 and we can go together?"

Chapel dropped into the chair at her desk. Thoughts passed rapidly through her mind. Her first instinct was to say no, to crawl even deeper into her privacy and continue to hold herself apart. But isn't that what I always accused Spock of doing? Holding himself apart, separate from everyone?

It seems that Spock has died as he had lived -- alone. Did I want that? I wanted to love Spock, to share myself with him and for him to share himself with me. Maybe ... maybe I have been holding myself just as apart. Maybe

"Chris ... Chris ... you there? What about it?"

Suddenly her decision was made. "Connery ... Niles. Okay. I have to check on some things first. Why don't you meet me in Sickbay?"

"Sure. See you at 1300. Out."

Chapel sat at her desk, stunned at her action. In some ways she felt freer than she had in a long, long time. Even her head didn't hurt quite as much as earlier.

Taking a deep breath, she stood up and crossed over to the bath. Stopping in front of the mirror on the door she spoke, "You're going to be okay, Dr. Chapel. You're going to be okay."

Dropping her clothes on the floor, she stepped into the sonic shower. And when she emerged, Chapel felt like an almost new person. Spock was loved; he was in her past, like childhood and treasured memories. She recognized that she had locked herself away from relationships as completely as ... well, she could let him go and allow herself to go on with her life. She would grieve and she would mourn, but she would go on.

Getting dressed, Chapel thought again of Spock. This time the memories were not as painful. Looking at the chronometer she noted the need to hurry. After all, she didn't want to be late meeting Niles. Maybe Niles would be a good first step back into the world she had cut out of her life.

Walking to the door of her quarters, she passed the terminal on her desk, the information on Spock still on the screen. She reached out and pressed a key to erase the file. "Good bye, Spock," Chapel said softly, and walked out the door.





Anomalies

It is not logical that
cacti survive such intense cold:
fire and ice cannot occupy
the same space in time.
Yet I see before me mute evidence
of such contradiction.
And if machines cannot lie,
beyond exists
yet another anomaly:
Human and Vulcan within the same form.
Can I believe such data?
Or is this fantasy?
There has been but one
successful Vulcan/Human hybrid,
and he is dead.
Have I the courage
to complete this equation?

— Ellen Hulley

© Jäger Linn

AULD LANG SYNE

BY KIM KNAPP

"That 'Genesis' stuff sure has everyone in a flap," Henderson said. "I heard the Klingons are accusing our representatives of 'not negotiating in good faith.'"

Tech Chief Art Tooley leaned forward, loudly tapping the tabletop in front of Henderson. "Don't you listen to your Watch Officer?" he asked quietly. "Forbidden subject."

Henderson, a small, nervous First Class Tech, looked quickly around the Senior Enlisted lounge, then back at Tooley, and pushed his hair out of his eyes. "Only ones here are us and a few boys from Spacedock Maintenance."

Chief Tooley snorted, his long slim frame seeming to shake with the exclamation. "Don't you believe it! Starfleet has their internal Investigations agents all over the place." He sipped his drink, then leaned forward again, dark eyes serious. "There's four guys in the brig already for bringing up what you just did. Keep it shut." He drained his drink, earning a rude noise from Henderson.

"This from an ale-sluggin' chief?" Henderson scoffed.

Tooley stood up, then bent over menacingly. "it's non-intox, I got duty in an hour." His voice lowered slightly. "By the way, Tech-First, get a haircut." His tone emphasized the lower rank, and he straightened, fastened his uniform flap, and left the lounge. He just had time to get dinner and check his mail before logging in for his shift.

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"Tooley. You're early," Chief Bernstein noted, checking the wall clock.

"Yeah. Miracles happen," Tooley acknowledged. "Anything new on the skeds?"

Bernstein shook his head. "No. Light traffic tonight - you got a restaurant supply ship due in at 0200, that's it." The chubby man with the hook nose was finishing his duty log entry as he spoke, his fingers tapping rapidly on the console. "Did you see the new arrival?"

"No. What's up?" Tooley noticed an intensity in Bernstein's tone that he'd never heard before.

"It's Enterprise, and is she banged up. Take a look." Bernstein jerked his chin toward the large observation window.

Involuntarily, Tooley sucked breath. Enterprise's hull showed black burn marks, and they looked fresh. Part of her revealed recent repair work. Somewhere inside of him, he ached, wondering how she survived everything she'd been through. "What in the hell happened to her?" he demanded.

Bernstein glanced around, although they were alone in the Spacedock Operations Control Room. "She's the ship that was involved with the..." his voice lowered, "... genesis thing."

"Good God!" Tooley breathed.

"Didn't you serve on that ship?" Bernstein asked, turning his full attention on Tooley.

"Yeah. I was on board her famous 'five-year mission.' I was on secondary bridge shift, too, saw ... a helluva lot. Times I thought we were dead, Cap -- I mean, Admiral -- Kirk had us out by the skin of our teeth." He shook his head sadly. "That's a damn fine ship. I put in for her, when I'm off shore duty next month."

Bernstein whistled morosely. "Then you haven't heard yet," he said.

Pulling his attention away from the window, Tooley stared at the holder chief. "Heard what?"

"They're retiring her," Bernstein said. "Decommission ... probably make a museum out of her ... or sell her to a Belt miner to haul ore."

Tooley didn't hear the last words. "Retire ... Enterprise?" he repeated softly.

A finger snapped in front of his nose. "Tooley! You gonna relieve me or not?"

"I relieve you," Tooley whispered automatically. He counted. "Four years on Altair, five years on Enterprise, four years at Starbase 12, almost five here...." His eyes were drawn back to the ship. "I never served on her after her refit. They wouldn't let me out of shore duty early. Damn. It just doesn't seem possible."

Bernstein stood, patted the bony shoulder. "Tooley, I gotta go. I leave you with a clear board, one incoming item later, and plenty of time for your thoughts."

At the door he turned, stared back at the almost boyishly slim chief. Tooley was sunk in thought, his hands clenched under his chin, his eyes fixed on Enterprise. Bernstein sighed. "Don't take it too hard, Art," he called. Damned if he could figure out what it was about Enterprise that seemed to enslave her former crewmembers to her memory.

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Tooley looked the board over guiltily. Spacedoors secured. Security showed no alarms, nothing unexpected incoming--that restaurant ship wasn't due for almost two hours. He glanced at Enterprise again, noticing the cables leading to her engineering section from Spacedock Support Systems.

Retire the Enterprise! He couldn't even think of it without getting that funny lurch inside him. She hadn't been his first duty station, or his last, but somehow she'd become the most special. He couldn't imagine Starfleet without Enterprise out there somewhere.

He glanced over at Excelsior. Some designer with illusions of artistry had put that thing together, and the sleek, fast look of the Constitution class was suddenly a mockery in this ship. Please don't put me on that thing, he silently begged the powers-that-be.

His eyes fastened back on the Enterprise, and he blinked. There were lights on in the bridge dome - she was supposed to be secured. He double-checked the log board. Right. No personnel aboard, none authorized until tomorrow. Deep inside of him, a spark of hope was born.

When he realized that Enterprise was moving slowly, he saw his dilemma quickly. Unless this was just a move to make her more convenient to the dismantling crew who would gut her of usable equipment, she was leaving. And he had no authorization to open Spacedoors to allow her egress.

He glanced at his scanners. By God! Her engines were on, not just impulse engines, but the drive as well. What to do? If this was legal, he would have been contacted with the necessary orders to allow her to leave. Frantically, he scanned the log for the last two shifts, but no such command had been received.

She was backing now, nacelles first, toward the spacedoors. His heart lurched painfully as he thought of Enterprise crumpling in agony against the reinforced titanium hull of the Spacedoors.

His scanners demanded his attention, and the voice announcement rang out, calmly voicing the danger. "Spacedoors are closed." Tooley saw on another monitor

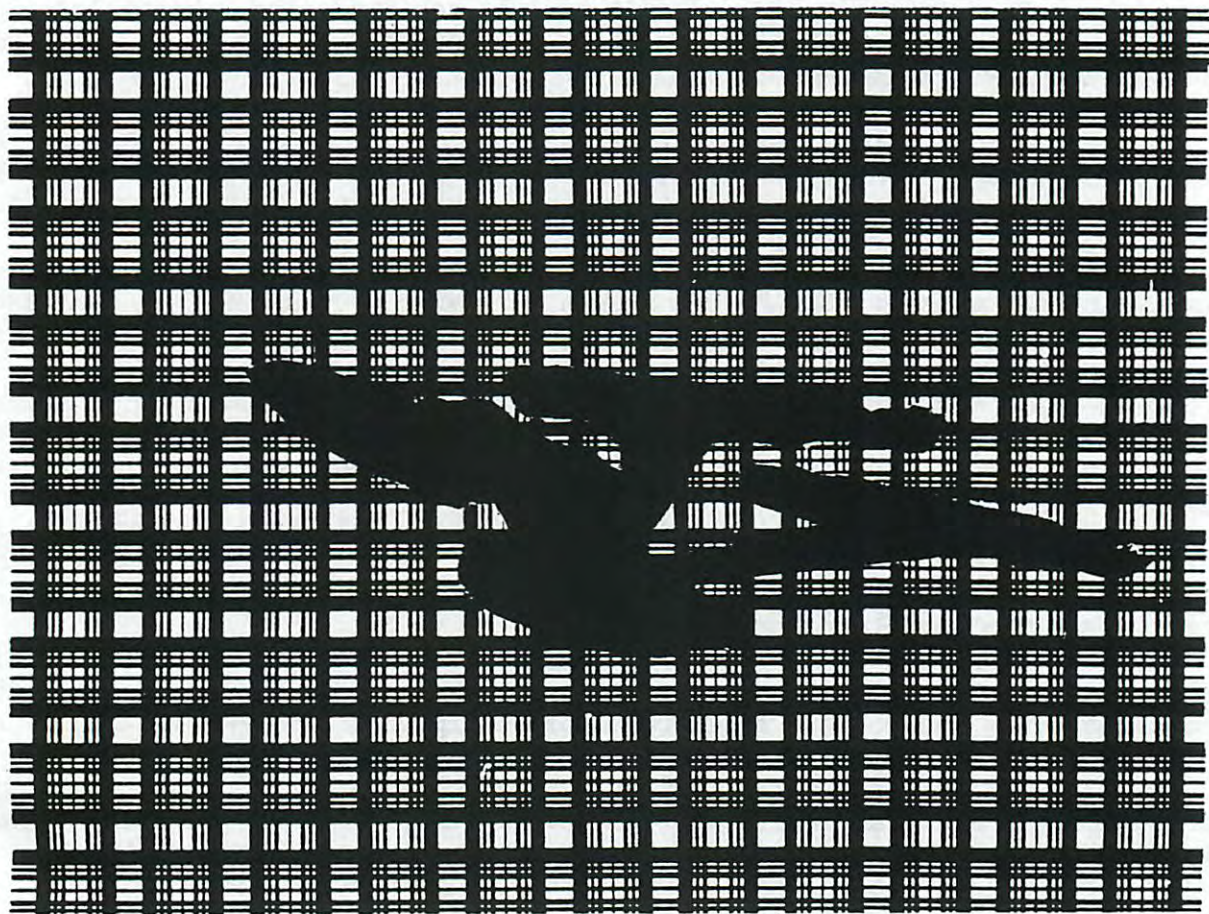
that someone on the ship was trying to override his board and order the doors to open. He swallowed convulsively. They couldn't have known that the frequency was changed almost every day, and guarded carefully. His system overrode their signal automatically and the doors remained closed. It didn't work. Stubbornly, Enterprise advanced.

Tooley wiped his suddenly sweating forehead. He could not sit and watch this, could not allow this ship to destroy herself for nothing. Surely there had to be a reason....

Without conscious thought, his fingers stabbed at the Emergency Open control and he was able to breathe finally as he saw that the signal was being received. He slumped in his chair as the armored doors began to withdraw, reading from the instruments that Enterprise would clear the doors - barely.

Someone pounded on the locked door leading into the control room. Whoever was on board would think they had been successful. Starfleet, seeing his board, would know better.

His last sight of the Enterprise was joined with the knowledge that he had thrown almost twenty years in Starfleet into the refuse chute. Somehow, though, knowing that Enterprise was out there, was some consolation. He turned to the duty log and entered his actions, then signaled for a relief. There had to be someone here when Security took him away.



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Contrapunto

I doubt this dour Scot will ever take the place
of my Vulcan, so sure, exacting behind his mask,
but welcome Scotty's cunning, as clever in the face
of our adversity, as anyone could ask,
for if I cannot look to Spock to set the pace,
this engineer will follow any ordered task.
My eager Russian seems to carry time within a flask,
as energetic as he ever was in youth,
emotion so engrained, as if he were naive;
and since McCoy is felled, not here to guide my heart,
I place my trust in Chekov, to always voice the truth.
For if I cannot have these souls for whom I grieve,
I'll have to settle for an able counterpart.

— Ellen Hulley





EXILES

by Karen Rhodes



It was dark outside. Inside, the apartment was silent save for the measured ticking of an ancient clock; the lights were dim, the air cool. He stood before the fireplace, reaching up to remove from the white brick wall one of the antique dueling pistols that had hung there mutely all these years. He grasped the butt, felt the smooth, warm wood; he ran his fingers along the cold steel barrel. The hand holding the gun shook as he laid the weapon gently on a soft wrapping cloth, closed the folds about it, and placed it in a storage canister.

He removed the pistol's mate, wrapped it, and placed it in the canister. Then he turned and walked to the steel-and-glass shelves which stood just inside the entryway. A scale model of an archaic sailing vessel, perfect in every detail, stood at eye level. He took it gently in his hands, turning it and examining it with loving care.

Suddenly, he was not looking at the model, but at the stern and uncompromising visage of Chief Judge Advocate Admiral Chen ya-Shan. "James T. Kirk," he heard the admiral's voice intone in solemn judicial cadence, "you have been found guilty on all counts. It remains for me to pass sentence upon you."

He closed his eyes, trying to blot out the vision. It persisted. His mind's eye turned to see Sulu, Uhura, Scott, McCoy, and Chekov standing in the prisoners' dock, grimly silent, their eyes on him. They'd already been convicted, dismissed from the service, sentenced to exile for their part in the hijacking of the Enterprise and the forbidden voyage to Genesis. They've lost everything because they followed me, Kirk reprimanded himself, forgetting that they had all gone with him willingly.

His inner vision turned slowly in a panorama of the chamber in which the trial had been held. The building itself was new, an open and airy structure which appeared as if it would topple in a summer breeze. But in fact, the structure could withstand forces as strong as those which had been released when the San Andreas fault had finally given way 250 years before, carrying half of old San Francisco into the bay.

The building was new, yes, but the chamber of this court-martial -- the grimmest and most solemn of military traditions -- bore the mark of centuries. The solid oak paneling and curved beams had been formed from the corpse of an ancient sailing vessel hauled up from the depths of the Pacific. A brass bell from a twentieth-century battleship sat on the deep-stained desktop in front of the Chief Judge Advocate.

All that pomp and circumstance, Kirk mused darkly, just to chop off my head. They did a damn good job.

He remembered the sentence ya-Shan had handed down: "You are hereby stripped of your Starfleet commission. You will never again be permitted to contact any member of Starfleet, and are barred from permanent residency on Federation member worlds; nor will you be allowed any benefits which may have accrued to you by virtue of past service. You have three days to settle your affairs here and leave Earth, never to return."

When your life's blood is drained away, Kirk heard himself thinking, what else is left?

Unaware of his motions, he placed the ship model gently back on the shelf. His eyes felt hot. He felt his hands tremble, clench into fists, shake violently. His body shook and tears slipped slowly down his cheek. No! He fought for self-control and, as in so many battles in the past, he won.

Once again master of his emotions, he picked up the model to prepare it for storage. His movements became robotic as he packed away the icons of his life. When he'd filled two small containers, he stopped, stepping down into the office area overlooking the bay. The lights of pleasure craft and small commercial boats moved like diamonds across the velvet black water. He turned to pour himself a drink when the door chime sounded.

Who the hell...? he wondered. "Come," he called out hoarsely, waiting for the door to slide open and reveal the caller.

"I came as soon as I could, Jim," McCoy said as he entered.

"What?"

"Well, when I got your message--"

"What message?"

McCoy stopped. "You mean, you didn't send me a message, askin' me to come here?"

Kirk shook his head.

McCoy gave a palms-up shrug. "Well, I'm here, anyway." He stepped closer to his friend, commander, and patient. It was in this latter category that he now saw Kirk. "Are you all right?"

"Fine," Kirk mumbled. He turned to the table. "Want a drink?"

"Why not?"

Glasses in hand, they moved over to the two lounge chairs in front of the fire place, and Kirk thought of a time they'd sat there before and McCoy had told him "...get back your command, before it's too late..." That wasn't so long ago, Kirk reminded himself, but it seems like centuries. And now, it is too late. We have, indeed, been through death and life together.

He turned to McCoy. "You all packed?"

"Wasn't much to pack. I'm not one for hangin' on to things, I guess." The doctor gazed down into his glass. "I'm gettin' to be an old man, Jim; what have I got to show for it?"

Kirk stared at the toes of his boots. "I didn't expect it to end like this," he whispered apologetically.

"What'll you do now? Where'll you go?"

After a long silence, during which he drained his glass, Kirk finally said, "I don't know." Shaking off the despair, he asked, "What about you? You can't practice medicine--"

"Oh, they left me my civilian license," McCoy responded. "What I'll do with it, I'm not quite sure yet. I suppose I can find some hole-in-the-wall world where they need doctors." He paused, keenly aware of what he was saying, and what it meant to Jim. What skill does he have, the doctor asked himself, to make his living? If he can't function as a ship captain, he'll die.

They fell into a silence that stretched into the gloom. Kirk stared into the blackened fireplace. No fire burned there; and now, none in his soul. He'd never cared to stay Earthbound for long, but now he felt profoundly sad at having to leave, knowing he'd never be permitted to return.

Suddenly, the chime sounded again. With a sigh, Kirk rose and went to the door. When it opened, Scott was standing in the hallway, puzzled. "What was it ye

wanted t'see me about, Cap'n?" The engineer had never really been comfortable addressing Kirk as anything but Captain; somehow the title fit best.

"I—don't tell me you got a message, supposedly from me, asking you to come?"
"Aye."

"I sent no message, Scotty, but since you're here, come in."

Kirk was about to offer Scott a drink when the door signaled again. "What in hell is going on?" he asked himself testily as he strode to the door. Waiting outside were Sulu, Uhura, and Chekov. "My Three Musketeers," Kirk welcomed them. As Sulu started to ask the by now inevitable question, Kirk silenced him with an upraised hand, saying, "No, I didn't send you a message. Come in. I'm going to find out what's going on."

He was halfway to his computer when the door chime again announced visitors. At his signal, the door opened.

"Admiral Morrow!" Kirk exclaimed in surprise. Not only was the Commander of Starfleet standing at his forbidden doorway, but behind him were Spock and Lieutenant Saavik. All three were uncharacteristically dressed in civilian clothing.

"May we come in?" Morrow asked with an enigmatic expression.

Kirk's jaw set. "I thought I wasn't to associate with anyone from Starfleet," he stated sourly.

"I'll take the risk," Morrow said drily as he stepped authoritatively into the room, followed by the alien officers.

As the door slipped shut, Kirk stepped back into the main room. His breathing became more rapid, and he knew he was not going to be able to keep the bitterness out of his voice. "A high-level sendoff for the disgraced former Starfleet admiral? Or are you here to make sure I don't overstay my welcome?"

Morrow executed a smart about-face and stood inches from Kirk. "I'm here," he said simply, "to deliver your orders."

Kirk's eyes narrowed. "Orders? You mean my banishment."

"I mean orders, Admiral Kirk."

"What? Don't play games with me, Harry," Kirk snarled. This is too much, he told himself, and I'm not going to stand for it. "You heard ya-Shan take away my rank."

"Jim--"

"Wasn't that enough?"

"Jim," Morrow reiterated, "I want you to listen to me, more carefully than you did the last time." The corners of his mouth turned slightly upward.

The bastard's enjoying this, Kirk thought angrily. "All right," he muttered, surrendering at last, refreshing his drink and downing a healthy gulp. "What's this bull about orders?"

"No bull." The supreme commander drew a tape chip from a pocket. "Class One Priority, top secret." He handed the chip to Kirk, who turned it over in his hands, obviously confused. "I sent your friends the messages to assemble here."

"You!" Kirk eyes were flint. "What the hell for?"

"So I could give you a briefing on your assignment."

"What assignment? Will you tell me what in hell is going on?"

"If you'll give me a chance," Morrow retorted. He glanced around at the assembled crew. "Maybe you'd all better sit down."

When the convicted Enterprise officers had arranged themselves on the lounge chairs and along the raised fireplace hearth, Morrow continued, "These orders also contain your commissions, but the fact that you retain your rank is also, at this time, under the highest security classification."

"What'd you say, sir?" McCoy asked, not believing what he had heard.

Kirk slowly nodded his head, finally beginning to catch on. "The trial was a phony, wasn't it, Harry. Ya-Shan was in on it, too, acting under direct orders from you. Why didn't you tell us beforehand? Why put us through a trial at all?"

"Because I needed it to look as convincing as possible."

"But you could have told us; we would have kept the secret."

"No, Jim. I felt it would be more believable to everyone -- the press, the public, and the enemy -- if you really thought you had been convicted. I needed you all to be bitter."

"I hope we didn't disappoint you," Kirk retorted sarcastically.

"You were all most convincing."

"We're going undercover, aren't we."

Morrow nodded, and Kirk asked, "Why?"

"Captain Spock will fill you in. I have to get back; I'm supposed to be in my office, not here." He extended his hand to Kirk. "Jim, you were right and I was wrong. I wish you the best of luck. For god's sake, be careful."

"Always," Kirk replied, shaking hands, still bemused.

Morrow left, and Spock took over the briefing. "As you have surmised, Jim, the trial was a sham. It was necessary to create the appearance that all of you were discredited, dismissed from the service in disgrace. This is your cover."

"As to your mission, the Klingon vessel which you brought back from Genesis has been completely examined by Starfleet Intelligence. The ship's record tapes yielded much valuable data, as you will see when you view your orders. At the civilian spaceport at Oakland, there awaits a merchant vessel which has been especially modified for this mission. The ship is registered in your name, Jim," Spock said as he handed Kirk the ship's document tapes. "You will carry odd cargoes to backwater planets near the Klingon sector, appearing to have turned to shady merchant practice as a means of supporting yourselves in your exile."

"It is vital, Jim, that you maintain the pretense of an embittered and dispossessed man. There are hostile elements that will be watching you."

"Where will you be?" Kirk asked.

"Lieutenant Saavik and I will be nearby. I have been given command of one of the new transwarp-drive ships, and will be assigned the quadrant as my patrol area. Here is a chip containing a complete listing of my patrol schedule." Spock paused, his eyes fixed on Kirk. "We will be able to assist you with information and what intelligence we can gather. You may call upon us for direct help as well, but only in the direst of emergencies when you have no recourse and your lives are at maximum risk. You are essentially alone, Jim, and must exercise utmost care."

"Don't worry; we'll be careful. How do I contact you?"

"Coded channel 85 delta." Spock paused, then, "Again, Jim, I urge you to use all your skill, knowledge, and experience. This is a highly dangerous assignment." He turned to Saavik, indicating it was time for them to leave, but Kirk stopped him.

"Your ship...what's her name?"

Spock raised his eyebrow. "Enterprise," he replied. He hesitated, seeing in Kirk's face a mixture of surprise, resentment and pain. In a low voice, he said, "It is not the same, Jim. It never could be."

As the door panel slid shut after Spock and Saavik, Kirk and his friends gathered around the computer. Kirk keyed in a security code to activate electronic shielding and loaded the tape chip which Admiral Morrow had given him; the screen blinked, then displayed the following:

CLASSIFIED

Class One Top Secret

To: James T. Kirk, Admiral, SC 937-0176-CEC

Subject: Counterespionage

Starfleet Intelligence has examined thoroughly the Bird of Prey ship you brought back from Genesis. Aboard that ship, in its duty log, was information indicating that your report to Starfleet Command regarding the events surrounding the creation of the Genesis planet was purchased from a person or person unknown by a female Klingon spy named Valkris. The merchant ship aboard which the spy was operating was destroyed by Kruge, the Bird of Prey's commander, presumably because she knew too much.

Kirk paused the readout, his eyes opaque, his expression sober. "Kruge," he whispered. So that was the name of the individual I killed on that doomed, damned planet. It's brutal enough to have to kill, but not to know the name of the one you killed... He leaned forward, pressed a key, and the readout continued:

What information we have been able to obtain indicates that the data were sold by someone in Starfleet. An investigation into this is continuing but we need more information which can only be obtained out there in the border quadrant. Interrogation of the Klingon prisoner Maltz yielded nothing; yesterday he was found dead in his cell, an apparent suicide, though cause of death has not been established as yet.

Therefore, Admiral Kirk, you are ordered to proceed with your officers aboard the tradeship Ursa Major to Klingon Border Quadrant 12, there to engage in merchant activities of questionable legality, to establish your cover as an embittered ex-Starfleet officer who might be willing to strike a deal for a chance to 'get back' at the Starfleet which has turned him away.

You will gather intelligence, with the object of learning who it was that sold Valkris the data. You are then ordered and empowered to arrest this individual and return with him to Starfleet Headquarters. You are urged to be extremely cautious and bring into play every survival skill at your command. The people you will be dealing with are ruthless and extremely dangerous. They have nothing to lose.

Good luck, Admiral Kirk, to you and your crew.

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Kirk cleared the screen and retrieved the chip, placing it in an inner tunic pocket, patting it and murmuring to himself a quotation from the book Spock had given him on that birthday which now seemed so long ago: "Recalled to life."

A motley group gathered at the spaceport on the third day. Dressed in civilian clothes and carrying only one soft duffel bag each, they filtered in by ones and twos to the launching facility. Each had spent two days building the myth of embitterment, shunning friends, severing any ties which could bind them to this tiny globe.

They had studied the data on Ursa Major, but viewing a tape on a reader could not prepare them for what sat on the pad at the Oakland spaceport. She was scorched, battered, and discolored. The pitted and scarred hull, with pipes and extensions that made her look like a plumber's nightmare, was a letdown. That, Kirk thought dejectedly, is one raunchy-looking ship.

"Maybe the trial was for real, after all," McCoy commented, "and this is our sentence."

"But Starfleet has outlawed the death penalty, Doctor," Chekov chimed in.

"Looks like they're reinstated it," Sulu joined in. "It's going to be suicide hunting Klingons in this."

Kirk shrugged, saying, "Don't judge a book by its cover, gentlemen. Let's go inside and see if she's all she's supposed to be." He reached into his pocket and drew out the magna-lock Spock had given him along with the ship's document tapes. He affixed the device to the side of the hatch and twisted it. A series of soft musical tones sounded, then the hatch slid open.

"Identity, please," a computer voice requested.

McCoy jumped. "This damn ship's gonna talk to us every time we come aboard?"

"Identity, please," the computer voice reiterated.

Kirk glanced at McCoy with a crooked grin, then responded with his name, rank and serial number.

"Identity confirmed," the computer stated. A soft hum which had not caught the attention of any of the crew suddenly stopped and Kirk then realized that the ship was booby-trapped.

"Spock wasn't kidding," he muttered to himself as he entered, with the rest to

the crew following. With all the sophisticated gear and classified information already aboard this thing, he told himself as he headed for the bridge, it's no surprise. The sensor beam that cut off when I identified myself is probably interfaced with the self-destruct. He shivered.

She was wedge-shaped, with the tapered end forward. The lower deck was the longest part of the ship with the bridge at the forward end. Behind the bridge was the transporter room and cargo storage. The middle deck, which would, in an ordinary merchant vessel of this class, have held a single large crew cabin and more cargo storage, had been modified to provide comfortable quarters for the captain and crew. Kirk had a stateroom on the port side aft; Scott's cabin was just forward of Kirk's; Chekov and Sulu shared quarters on the starboard side aft; and Uhura's quarters were on the starboard side amidships. Forward of the crew quarters was a well-equipped sickbay which also contained McCoy's office and cabin.

Engineering and ship's computers occupied the upper deck, the shortest dimension of the wedge. Fire control for the ship's weaponry, directed from the bridge, was centered here. Disguised under the melange of pipes along each side of the ship were two powerful warp engines, providing a standard cruising speed of Warp 5, a top cruising speed of Warp 7, and capable of Warp 10 emergency speed. The engines also provided power for the vessel's defensive shields, and for the two forward, two aft, two port, and two starboard phaser banks.

Chekov gave a Slavic sigh when he saw the bridge. "This is supposed to be a fighting wessel? Look at these antiquated controls; this equipment looks like something from the Moscow State Museum."

Sulu strode onto the bridge like the swashbuckler he imagined himself, at heart to be. His appearance, however, was more that of a back alley assassin than a Saturday-matinee hero. He had taken great pains to costume himself as a shady character, and, if a contest had been held to determine which of the Ursa Major's crew most looked the part of an outcast who had turned to lawlessness to earn his living, the wiry Japanese would have won hands down.

He moved to the helm/navigation console, which had been combined into one station. He sat, running his fingers over the control switches, programming in a simulated course. The display lit up, and he exclaimed, "Pavel! Look again!" The archaic-looking control boards disguised the latest in cybertronic equipment --helm and nav computers, communications decks, sensors -- all much more compact and more powerful than much older and less reliable gear. Like that on the old Enterprise, Sulu thought sadly. Well, he told himself, it's progress.

Chekov, whose garb resembled that of his Russian peasant ancestors, seated himself at the scientific console which housed the sensors and the master computer controls. Weapons and shields were also controlled from Chekov's station. "I see what you mean, Hikaru," he said breathlessly as he manipulated his board. "This is fantastic!" He turned enthusiastically toward Kirk and noticed that the admiral's eyes were focused far away, a wistful and sad expression on his face. Before Chekov could react, the melancholy had passed and Kirk strode around the bridge, examining every station in turn.

"Admiral Kirk--" Uhura began as the C.O. approached.

Kirk corrected her with a wry grin. "I've been stripped of my rank, remember?"

She nodded. "I'm sorry, sir."

Kirk dismissed the apology, addressing his crew as a body. "We're going to have to be careful how we talk to each other. It might not be a bad idea if we get into the habit right away of not using rank to address each other."

"It's a hard habit t'break, Cap'n," Scotty said. "I mean--"

"No problem with that, Scotty. After all, as master of this vessel, I am entitled to that title," Kirk said. "Just be careful, all of you. Our lives depend on it."

Uhura tried again. "Captain, I found this tape in my console," she said as she held up a red chip. "It's our destination and cargo manifest."

Kirk took it. "I'll look at this later, in my cabin. Right now," he said

turning to Scott and McCoy, "you gentlemen might want to check out your own areas."

The two nodded and left the bridge.

"All systems indicate ready, Captain, and we are cleared for liftoff," Uhura informed Kirk. Her station, combining the communications, internal systems sensors, and library computer, promised to keep her busy. She was glad; that would give her less time to dwell on the danger they were about to sail into.

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It was late, in ship's time-reckoning, when Kirk left the bridge and retired to his quarters to store in his safe the data chips Admiral Morrow and Spock had given him, and to view the manifest. He had not read very much of the listing of their cargo when he paged McCoy. Bones needs to see this, he told himself. He's not going to like it.

When the doctor entered, Kirk offered him a chair next to his in front of the console that housed his viewer, recorder, and personal communications station. He glanced at McCoy, evaluating his mood, then said, "We're going to Pandora. Not a nice place."

"What's in the hold," McCoy asked, "phasers for sale to the criminal element?"

"No," Kirk said quietly. "Look." He punched up the cargo manifest and the monitor scrolled slowly, listing crate after crate of medical supplies.

McCoy's eyebrow rose perceptibly. "They expecting a plague on Pandora? Or a war?"

Kirk sighed. "No. Just a thriving black market."

"Black market?" McCoy stopped, turning to Kirk. He stared at him briefly, then stood and paced the room as he realized what the Admiral meant. "We're supposed to sell this stuff on the black market so some greedy bastards can make a fortune off the suffering of others? We're supposed to live off this?"

"Bones," Kirk stood up, his hands extended in pleading. "We are undercover; we're playing a role. We have to--"

"Keep up appearances? For the good of the mission?" McCoy made no effort to keep the bitterness out of his voice. He approached Kirk, stopping mere centimeters from him, his eyes drilling into the Admiral's. "I never thought I'd see the day you'd sell your soul, to Starfleet or anybody else!" He turned and headed for the door.

"Doctor McCoy!" Kirk barked. The physician stopped but did not turn as the Admiral added huskily, "I sold it to Starfleet, long ago. And I bought it back again. On Genesis."

McCoy placed a hand on the door jamb and leaned heavily on it. He turned. "Jim, I--"

Kirk's face was stone. "The bastard who sold my report to the Klingons killed my son."

"Revenge, Jim?" McCoy gazed hard at his friend, trying to fathom the agony he was feeling.

Kirk hesitated, then answered, "No. Justice." He shook off the hard facade, showing his vulnerability, his pain. "I'm sorry we have to do it this way, Bones. We don't have much choice. We can't accomplish this mission in uniform; we can't go where we're going in a Federation starship. We have to dress like the kind of scum we're looking for; we have to look like them, talk like them, smell like them."

"And act like them," McCoy said sadly.

"I don't like it any more than you do; but if we're to get close to the son of a bitch who sold my report--"

"All right, Jim," McCoy finally conceded. "But I'm going to drive a hard bargain."

"Done," Kirk said quietly. "Good night."

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Freeport, the largest habitation on the bleak world of Pandora, swarmed with trade craft of every description. The crews of these vessels, in Scott's words,

"look as though they'd just as soon stick a knife in yer back as look at ye." Kirk and his crew emerged from the Ursa Major with phaser pistols strapped prominently on their hips.

It did not take them long to find a willing buyer for the cargo of medical supplies. To Kirk's surprise and gratification, McCoy did indeed drive a hard bargain, letting the buyer know that if heard of any talk of these supplies being misused, causing suffering rather than relieving it, he would personally come looking for the man and show him a few tricks of his own. Kirk stood in the background during the exchange, thoroughly convinced that McCoy was capable of making good his threat.

They also found an interesting bit of information: Pandora, a wide-open trading and mining planet, was owned by a shadowy figure referred to only as The Boss. Kirk had to chuckle. The last man he'd known by that title had been Bela Omxmyx, a curious mixture of the comical and the menacing. From the behavior of the denizens of Pandora, he got the distinct feeling that this Boss was far more menacing than comical.

As night fell, the Ursa Major's master and crew headed toward the center of Freeport, toward the bars and dives and fleshpots. "This place is raunchier than Wrigley's Pleasure Planet," McCoy commented. "Maybe I should have kept some of the antibiotics off that shipment."

"We'll just have to be careful," Kirk quipped. He gave Uhura a look of concern. Though he knew well that she was a trained and hard-nerved fighter, she appeared vulnerable in the flowing African robe and jeweled headress she had adopted as her disguise. And, too, he was responsible for her, as he was for all his crew. "Are you going to be all right?" he asked her.

She smiled an exaggerated smile and cooed, "With five strong, handsome men to protect me, I'll be just fine."

"My dear," McCoy drawled, "you do have a way with words."

Kirk zipped his satiny jacket closed more snugly against the chill wind that blew across the street. McCoy had quipped earlier that the thick black jacket made Jim look more like a streetwise thug than a ship's commander. Kirk replied with a straight face that he had admired a similar jacket on a San Francisco police officer who told him it was departmental issue; the admiral had later gone to the Police Department and bought one.

"I can see you as a street cop," McCoy had teased, grinning.

In the first bar they entered, as in the six or seven they visited in the next two to three hours, they sat, listened, drank a little, minded their own business for a while, then asked a few pertinent questions: "Ever seen this woman before?" Kirk would inquire of a bartender or patron, showing a holographic slide of Valkris obtained from the records of the Bird of Prey. "Who is The Boss? I hear he owns this planet. What — or who — else does he own?" In every dive, the answer was the same: a determined silence. A code was in force on this planet, one that was proving difficult to break.

They prowled all the sleazy dives in the city, listening, watching, asking questions. In mere hours, they witnessed enough depravity to last even the most jaded for a lifetime. In one bar, a chained Orion slave woman danced seductively while in the dark corners, acts of cruelty and violence served to entertain select groups of patrons. In another, two supple young Andorians entwined in sinuous sexuality to the cheers and hoots of the crowd. It took some time for anyone among the Ursa Major crew to notice that the two 'entertainers' were of the same gender.

It was nearly ten o'clock when Kirk and his crew emerged onto the street from the latest joint they visited. Their walk to the next bar was interrupted abruptly as two large air-cushion vehicles whined to a halt next to them and ten uniformed and armed men poured out, aiming their weapons at the undercover Starfleet operatives. "You come with us," a tall, gaunt individual ordered.

Kirk stepped forward, demanding, "Who the hell are you?" He slowly moved his right hand toward the butt of his phaser.

Guards surrounded them instantly. Two of them slammed Kirk against the wall.

He felt the sharp prick of a knifepoint against his left carotid artery. Deeming discretion to be better than valor, Kirk ordered his crew, "Give them your weapons."

"That's better," the guard in charge said as the others silently collected the phasers. "In there." He pointed to the first ACV, and the Ursa Major crew climbed in.

"Where are they taking us?" Uhura asked.

"If we're lucky," Kirk said slowly, "they're taking us to The Boss."

"And if we're unlucky?" McCoy inquired pointedly.

Kirk shrugged ruefully. "They're taking us to The Boss."

♦♦♦

"I am Hector Gruenwald," the portly and obviously wealthy man, clad in an elaborately-embroidered dressing gown of Rigelian ultrasilk, informed Kirk and his crew. He pronounced his name 'Groonvault,' in a Germanic accent. From Earth, Kirk guessed.

"And I'm--" Kirk began.

"I know who you are, Admiral Kirk." Gruenwald paused, smiling knowingly. "Forgive me; former Admiral Kirk. Well, no matter. I am honored to have you as my guest." He turned to the swarthy man who stood guard at the door. "Pepy, please escort the admiral's crewmembers to the lounge, and provide for their entertainment. I wish to speak to Kirk in private."

Wordlessly, Pepy indicated that the crew were to follow him. The door shut solidly and Kirk and Gruenwald were alone.

Kirk moved about the room, inspecting the art treasures which graced the walls to see if any concealed listening or viewing devices. He glanced skeptically at Gruenwald, who smiled benignly in return. "You have been asking questions, Admiral Kirk," the German began conversationally, offering a drink.

"Just plain 'Kirk' will do," the admiral replied, trying to inject bitterness into his tone as he accepted the glassful of tawny liquor, drinking it down like a driven man.

"Very well," Gruenwald replied; then, his eyes locking with Kirk's, he continued, "from the questions you've been asking, I don't think you're here merely on personal business."

Kirk flinched, thinking ruefully: maybe I haven't done so well with the cover identity, at that.

"You've been looking for the Klingon woman," the entrepreneur stated. "You won't find her here. She's long gone."

How much do I dare tell him, the Starfleet admiral asked himself. He's smart and shrewd. "She's dust," he said curtly. Gruenwald shot him a curious look. "Her control, a Klingon named Kruge, spaced her. She knew too much."

"I know many things, and no one dares try to space me," Gruenwald said cryptically. Was it a warning?

Perhaps it was, for just then Kirk noticed out of the corner of his eye that they were not alone. Pepy had silently returned and was standing watchfully at the door. The admiral looked squarely at Pepy. The bodyguard's steely gaze answered: they both knew the rules of this game.

Appearing not to notice, Gruenwald continued blandly, "I will admit that even I do not know everything. This woman was, I gather, engaged in surreptitious activity."

Kirk snorted at the delicate phrase. "She was a spy."

"Yes," the entrepreneur agreed. "That she was. She was a smooth one. Smart, seductive, vicious, totally dedicated. I had my men keep an eye on her while she was here. She engaged a merchant vessel here, a flimsy old craft. I take it she was looking for something nondescript and expendable."

She hired the merchant craft here, Kirk repeated to himself. Then she must have already bought the copy of my report. Where? From whom? "Do you know where she came here from?"

"Alas, no," Gruenwald replied.

"Who did she see while she was here? Did she have contact with anyone suspicious?"

"Not anyone who meets my definition of that term. But there was one young man, I think she had him by the--" Gruenwald paused, smiling carnally. "I think he came here from Tombstone, or possibly Skinner's Planet. But I'm not sure."

"Who was this young man?" Kirk asked.

"His name I do not know, but Pepy can tell you of him. He will give you a description; he may even have an image of him."

That may be a start, Kirk told himself. Then he looked hard at Gruenwald. "How do I know you're not up to your neck in the same espionage as the Klingon woman?"

"I assure you, Kirk, I am not. It simply would not profit me. I have no love for the Klingons. They encourage pirates to raid my commerce; they render the marauders financial support. Not out of any motive of profit or any desire to assist the pirates; oh, no. They do it to soften us up for their raids!" Gruenwald poured himself another brandy. Kirk could not help but notice that the man's hand was shaking; he was barely under control. "No. I love the Klingons not; I would do nothing to aid them, and everything in my power to confound them. And that, happily, includes helping you."

Kirk shrugged. Take what you can get, he told himself. He asked Gruenwald, "Anything else?"

"There is no more. As I indicated, we monitored her closely while she was here. A Klingon cannot go unwatched on my planet!"

The sudden vehemence of the man's tone, as though he finally let go in one burst an anger he had tried to keep in check, startled Kirk. Is there more to his hatred of Klingons than mere irritation at having his trade harrassed by pirates and raiders?

This thought remained with Kirk as he thanked Gruenwald for his hospitality, had a brief conversation with Pepy, collected his crew and their weapons, and left the reclusive overlord's home. The boy whom Valkris had under her spell came from Tombstone or Skinner's Planet, the German had said.

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Five days later, the Ursa Major put in at High Mesa, the largest port on the planet of Tombstone, and discharged her cargo. That done, Kirk and his crew again headed for the lower quarters of the Spaceport, seeking information. They didn't have long to search.

In a smoke-filled, hot and crowded dive aptly named the "Den of Thieves," Kirk again showed the holograph of Valkris, asking if anyone had seen her. He showed another holograph as well -- the one Pepy had supplied of the young man whom Gruenwald had associated with the female spy. He was Human, a good looking young man with dark hair, blue eyes, and an innocent look about him. No one would admit to having seen either the boy or the woman, not right away. The admiral and his crew took a back table, ordered drinks, watched and waited.

After twenty minutes a gnarled, dark-skinned little man with the red, watery eyes of a sot approached the table and pulled a chair around, seating himself to Kirk's left. "You askin' questions," he said quietly. "I got answers. For a price."

"What price?" Kirk murmured.

The informant didn't get a chance to answer. Suddenly, he grunted, his back arching, his face contorted in pain. Then, he fell forward, his face smacking the table, a knife protruding from his back.

"Bones--!"

McCoy was up in an instant, lowering the man gently to the floor, examining him. He looked up and shook his head slowly. "He's not going to make it, Jim."

Kirk leaned down, his voice urgent, "What answers? Tell me!"

Slowly, agonizingly, the man reached into a pocket of his tunic, withdrawing a small tape chip. "H-hidden t-treasure," he stammered, then was gone.

Kirk took the chip from the dead man's hand. He glanced around the gloomy

saloon. Men were gathered in small groups, silent, stone-faced. No chance of knowing who threw the knife, Kirk realized; these aren't the kind of men who want to pay attention to such things. The killer's probably gone, anyway.

"Let's get out of here," the admiral muttered.

Back on board the ship, Kirk entrusted the tape chip to Uhura, who immediately went to work at her station to retrieve the data contained on it. She quickly found that the tape was damaged and that what data it did contain were in a crude personal code. Programming her computer to decode the information, she waited, Kirk standing right behind her.

"It's starting to come through, sir," Uhura announced, securing her earpiece firmly so she would not miss one bit of the data. "A private geological survey of Skinner's Planet, commissioned by..." She winced as the earpiece squawked in her ear. Deftly she worked her console, trying to bring up the garbled information. After several futile attempts, she turned to Kirk and reported apologetically, "That part of the tape is irreparably damaged, sir. I can't find out who commissioned the study."

"That's all right, Uhura," Kirk assured her. "Keep going."

"The survey covers a desert area of several hundred square kilometers, beginning about thirty-five kilometers from the settlement," Uhura continued. "Apparently the colony is concentrated in a limited area under intensive irrigation. The rest of the planet is desert, apparently useless, except--" she removed her earpiece and turned to Kirk, reported in subdued and sober voice, "it appears useless, Captain; but under a large section of the planet's desert is rich deposits of dilithium crystals."

"So that's it," Kirk murmured. "that would certainly be of interest to the Klingons, as hard-pressed as they are for resources in their own Empire."

"Do you think they'd seriously try to expand into this area, violating the treaty?" Uhura asked.

"If the stakes are high enough," Kirk replied grimly. "If these deposits are as vast as this information indicates, the Klingons would think it worth starting a war over."

"Then that would explain their interest in the Genesis device as a possible weapon," Sulu reasoned.

"They apparently had a misconception about the device from the start," Kirk corrected him. "They thought all along that it was a weapon."

"Leave it to the Klingons to think like that," Chekov muttered.

"Uhura," Kirk instructed, "check the library computer; get all the data you can on Skinner's Planet."

After a brief wait, the information was retrieved. There wasn't much. "Skinner's Planet," Uhura reported, "is an agricultural and low-technology manufacturing colony, privately owned as a cooperative by the colonists. They established the colony as a social experiment to re-test the socio-behavioral theories of mid-Twentieth Century philosopher and psychologist B. F. Skinner. There's no information on the geology of the planet. Evidently, the colonists had no interest in conducting such a study."

"Thank you," Kirk murmured, distracted. He massaged his jaw briefly in thought. "I'm going to try to find a suitable cargo to carry to Skinner's Planet. There may be answers there to some of our questions."

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It took the better part of a day and a night for Kirk to find a cargo he could conceivably sell on Skinner's. Finally he found a salvage load of agricultural implements, natural textiles, and household wares. "Gettin' pretty good at this, Jim," McCoy commented. "If we ever do get booted out of the fleet, we'll have something to fall back on." Kirk looked at him, knowing he was joking, but remembering that evening in his apartment after the trial. He had seriously wondered what he was going to do to make his living. No alternative he could think of at the time had appealed to him. This sure as hell doesn't make it, he thought.

The next morning, after a night's rest, the crew of the Ursa Major made ready for liftoff. Once spaceborne, Kirk had Uhura contact the Enterprise.

"Are you in trouble, Jim?" was Spock's first question.

"Not yet, but we're working on it," Kirk bantered back. "I need some information. Skinner's Planet, Spock. Is there any record of a geological study?"

"Stand by," the Vulcan replied. After several minutes, he came back on. "Negative. Why?"

Kirk informed Spock of the contents of the mysterious tape. "Fascinating," the Enterprise commander said. "I shall notify Starfleet immediately."

"Good. This could be a key piece in the puzzle. Check also for me on the identity and background of a Hector Gruenwald, from Earth, probably Germany. He owns Pandora."

Spock punched in the inquiry; he soon had his answer. "Hector Gruenwald is descended from German families of great wealth. He purchased Pandora some twenty years ago, and has administered it as a private fiefdom. However, there is no record of any violation of Federation statutes by this individual. His background contains one fact, Jim, which I think you will find of interest: Some fifteen years ago, the Klingons staged a raid on several planets in the area, including Pandora. In this raid, they murdered Hector Gruenwald's wife and infant son."

Kirk nodded privately to himself, then responded. "That explains a lot, Captain Spock; thank you." And lets me know that in matters involving the Klingons, at least, Gruenwald is telling the truth. He spoke again to Spock: "One more thing. Where in this sector would a private individual who wanted to remain anonymous find a geologist to do a study like that on Skinner's Planet? Do you think someone would take the trouble to bring one in from the home systems?"

"Not logical. He would try to find someone who was more familiar with the worlds of this quadrant." Spock paused, then added, with his insight into the human psyche, "Someone who could be trusted with the results."

"Either that, or this particular geologist was never heard from again."

Kirk saw Spock's eyebrow rise slowly. "That is a possibility." The Vulcan turned, speaking to someone out of the range of the view, then back to Kirk. "Lieutenant Saavik is querying the computer banks. Stand by." The answer was not long in coming. "There are several registered geologists on Pandora. This is logical; they have considerable mining activity."

"But no dilithium," Kirk added.

"Correct. Shall I inquire at Pandora about geologists?"

"No, thanks, Spock. I know someone there who can get the answers for me. Kirk out."

Spock signed off and the screen went blank.

"Uhura--" Kirk began.

"Contact Gruenwald and ask him about geologists," she completed his sentence for him. Kirk smiled.

Once contact with Gruenwald was established, Kirk told him what he wanted. The Boss, still willing to help anyone against the Klingons, replied within the hour. "One geologist, Domat Lenek, departed Pandora six months ago and has not yet returned. Nothing has been heard from him. His destination was unknown." Gruenwald leaned forward and pressed a button on his desk. The image on Kirk's screen changed to a holo of a smallish man with intelligent eyes and high cheekbones. "Here is a representation of Lenek."

Something about the man in the image seemed familiar. "I know that man from somewhere," Kirk murmured. Then it hit him. "That's the man in the bar! The one we got the tape from!"

From the captain's left, McCoy agreed. "By God, Jim; you're right. It is him."

"You have seen him, then?" Gruenwald inquired as the viewscreen shifted back to him. "Where?"

"On Tombstone. He looked considerably older than that, deformed somehow. He was dirty, unshaven, a drunkard. He gave us some information — and was murdered

for his trouble."

"Why did he not return here? Why would he be on Tombstone, and why would he have descended to such depths? He was one of our best geologists, a sober and serious man."

"I don't know. I'm having enough trouble figuring out why he chose us to give the information to."

Gruenwald knew better than to ask Kirk what the information was. He merely said, "Perhaps it was on the strength of your inestimable former reputation."

Kirk shrugged.

Gruenwald continued, "Pepy had his men search Lenek's office and home, but they found nothing which could be of help."

"Nothing on who hired him, I'll bet," Kirk said.

"That is so. I can help you no further in that regard."

The conversation was interrupted by Sulu. "Sir, I think we have something else to think about."

On the viewer now was the image of a small, sleek fighter. It bore no markings, no paint of any kind, and it broadcast no identity beam, but the design was unmistakable. It was Klingon and it had decloaked directly astern of the Ursa Major.

Kirk cut comms with a speed which probably left Gruenwald wondering what was happening. "Red alert!" the admiral cried. "Scotty! Full power!" he barked into the intercom. The engineer acknowledged, and Kirk then ordered the defensive screens activated.

"Shields up, phasers ready," Chekov reported.

"Do you think it's one of Gruenwald's 'pirates'," Sulu ventured, "or do they know who we are?"

"Judging from the way he came up cloaked, and waited until he was right on us to decloak, I'd say he's on to us," Kirk replied, his eyes never leaving the screen. "We might have asked one question too many on Pandora or Tombstone," he added grimly.

"He's firing!" Sulu yelled as the tactical sensor on his board indicated enemy weaponry being activated.

"Hard about!" Kirk ordered. "Fire phasers!"

Chekov tried to sight his target just as the enemy fire rocked the ship, spoiling his aim. "Dammit," he cursed. "I missed!"

"They didn't," Kirk muttered ruefully to himself. He jabbed the intercom button. "Scotty; damage report."

"That hit took a big bite out o' the portside shield, sir," the engineer reported. "It canna' take too many more."

"He's coming about again," Sulu reported, "getting ready to fire."

Kirk glanced over to Chekov. "Fire phasers, mister," he ordered.

Chekov complied and this time his aim was not impaired. He locked his target in before the other ship could fire; Ursa Major's phasers shimmered, hitting the enemy amidships. The fighter seemed to shake, then moved off.

The crew aboard the Ursa Major waited to see what the enemy would do next. It didn't take long for him to make his decision.

"Firing again, sir!" Sulu again read his indicator.

"Full charge phasers," Kirk ordered.

Both ships hit simultaneously. Aboard the disguised Federation trader, the lights and instruments sputtered momentarily before returning to full strength. Kirk paged Scott. "What happened?"

"Th' portside shield's gone, sir; we lost power for a moment when she winked out, but we're all right. Just keep our starboard side between us an' that ship."

"Captain!" Uhura shouted. Kirk whirled around just as a Klingon began materializing on the bridge. The loss of the portside shield had given a boarding party the hole it needed.

Kirk shouted an obscenity and dived for the Klingon, surprising him just as he completed beaming. Struggling with the burly enemy soldier, Kirk ordered, "Sulu!

Uhura! Take phasers and check Sickbay, Engineering, and the cargo hold. Scotty and Bones might need help!"

Chekov knew what the admiral expected him to do. He trained ship's phasers on the enemy vessel. Coldly he activated the weapons and watched as the small freighter glowed and finally disintegrated. Now the battle was for control of the Ursa Major.

Kirk found himself in a death struggle with an extraordinarily strong opponent. They rolled across the deck, the Klingon managing to get a grip around Kirk's throat. Out of the corner of his eye, Kirk noticed that they were lying next to his command chair. He shoved his left hand under the Klingon's chin and pushed hard, forcing the enemy's head against the base of the chair. As the Klingon lay momentarily stunned, Kirk regained his feet and glanced at the screen, then at Chekov. "Good work," he panted, trying to catch his breath. "Now, get out there and help your shipmates."

The door had just slipped shut behind Chekov when Kirk felt a jolt at the back of his knees that sent him sprawling. He rolled into the fall, coming to rest on his back, looking up at the Klingon who held in his hand a knife with one long gleamingly sharp blade.

"bIHeghqu', tera'gnan!" the Klingon snarled in his guttural language. Kirk didn't understand the words, but the meaning was clear. The Klingon pressed a small button on the side of the knife and, with a sharp click, two ancillary blades popped up on each side of the main blade. Kirk stared, and into his mind came the image of the dead body of his son, one large wound flanked by two smaller ones.

Kirk sprang to his feet, his eyes glaring coldly at the enemy. "All right, you Klingon bastard!" he growled. Warily, every animal instinct primed, he circled the Klingon, watching and waiting for any momentary hesitation, waiting for the time to strike.

Circling, eyeing each other with hatred, they moved about the bridge. Suddenly, the Klingon took a swipe at Kirk with the brutal knife. The Terran sidestepped and swirled to bring both fists, clenched together, down hard on the back of the enemy's neck. The Klingon dropped to his knees with a grunt and Kirk leaped onto his back, struggling to pin his arms. The Klingon rolled over, his weight forcing the air from Kirk's lungs.

With surprising agility, the big Klingon flipped around and pinned Kirk to the floor with one large hand wrapped around his neck. Kirk grasped, reaching up with both hands to force the Klingon's knife hand back. He felt every muscle in his arms straining. The knife slowly descended. His vision started to grow blurry, he felt his breath being cut off, and still the knife descended.

It can't end here! The silent shout echoed in Kirk's mind. He summoned his last dram of strength, willing his arms to hold the knife at bay.

"bIlaj SanIj," the Klingon uttered in a voice that was almost a command. "bIHegh, Qi'rq!"

His name being uttered in Klingonese told Kirk that his guess had been right; the enemy had sought them out, knowing who they were. How--? Kirk's thoughts were cut short by a searing pain in his arms as they gave way. Down came the knife; he cried out as it bit into his shoulder. He screamed again as the Klingon jerked the blade out of the wound, raising it to stab again.

Oh, God! Kirk thought; he's really going to kill me!

He stared, helpless, as the blade began its final descent. "Spock!" he cried out in despair. Privately, in the depths of his soul, he bade his friend a final farewell. Privately, too, he apologized to those who had followed him to his death.

He kept his eyes open, facing it head-on. Down came the knife, closer, closer. Then it stopped frozen in a blue haze. Eyes bulging in surprise, the Klingon toppled over and sprawled, unconscious, on the deck. Kirk closed his eyes briefly, sighed a deep breath of utter relief, and turned to see Scott standing in front of the door with his phaser leveled.

"Scotty—" Kirk mumbled weakly as the rush of adrenalin subsided and the loss

of blood made itself felt.

"Cap'n Kirk!" the engineer exclaimed, noticing now the wound that was turning Kirk's left shoulder red. "I'll get Dr. McCoy." He thumbed the intercom and paged the doctor.

"Scotty," Kirk asked through the agony that was rapidly taking him over, "the others?"

"Everythin's secure, Cap'n," the Scot replied confidently. "Sulu and Uhura got to us just in time."

"From now on," Kirk said haltingly, "we wear phasers at all times. Clear?"

Scott smiled. The captain never had to have a lesson repeated; he always learned from his errors. "Clear, sir."

"Chekov to bridge," the Russian piped over the intercom.

"Bridge. Scott here."

"Prisoners are lodged in the cargo hold. I am maintaining guard."

"Well done, lad. Send Sulu and Uhura back up here."

"They are on their way. Chekov out."

As Scott signed off, the door hissed open and Dr. McCoy dashed in, medical kit ready. Sulu and Uhura were right behind him. The doctor began to work on Kirk's shoulder wound, admonishing him, "You're gonna be laid up a few days with this, Jim."

"That's all right," Kirk said weakly. "Scotty can get us to Skinner's Planet."

Scott directed Sulu to escort the Klingon, who was slowly regaining consciousness, to the makeshift brig in the cargo hold. Uhura took over navigation, plotting laying in a corrected course to Skinner's Planet as McCoy helped Kirk stand up, heading for the door and Sickbay. The captain was just beginning to feel the effect of the emergency lasercautery which had staunched the bleeding, and of the spot infusion of synthetic plasma McCoy had given him to replace lost blood volume. He knew the feeling of returning strength would be transitory, enough to get him to Sickbay and no more.

Just as they reached the platform behind the center seat, a signal came over the fleet subspace frequency: "USS Enterprise to the tradeship Ursa Major."

Kirk turned, grasping the arm of the captain's chair and punching the tie-in. "This is the Ursa Major. Spock, what are you doing here? I thought you had resumed patrol."

"And your Mr. Gruenwald contacted Starbase 55 when your communications were interrupted. The starbase commander sent us back here to investigate Gruenwald's report of piracy."

Kirk looked sidelong at McCoy and murmured, "How about that Gruenwald? He's on top of everything." To Spock he replied, "The 'pirate' was a Klingon fighter, but we took care of it."

Over Kirk's shoulder, McCoy added, "And the admiral almost got taken care of, too. He's assigned to Sickbay for the next five days."

"Are you injured, Jim?" Spock asked the question in a routine fashion, but his concern was evident.

"I'll be all right. However, you might want to beam over a security team to escort the four prisoners we have back to the Enterprise." He paused, bracing himself against the command chair. It's wearing off fast, he warned himself. Taking a deep breath, he forced himself to continue, "I'm afraid this ship isn't equipped for carrying passengers."

"At once, Admiral. I urge you again to be careful."

"Spock," Kirk said with a weak chuckle, "you're turning into a worrywart."

The eyebrow went up again. Kirk was still chuckling as McCoy helped him off the bridge.

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Skinner's Planet seemed dull after Pandora and Tombstone, but to Kirk it was certainly preferable to five days spent lying in a bed in Sickbay. The shoulder,

well on its way to healing, bothered him only moderately as he and his crew emerged from the ship and began seeking a market for their cargo.

The 1,700 colonists of Skinner's settlement led sober, quiet and industrious lives. At least, that's how it appeared. When Kirk was suddenly and surprisingly summoned to the office of the colony's governor, William Bradford, a different picture was presented to him.

Bradford, a mousy, fortyish, balding man of bureaucratic manner, addressed Kirk diffidently. "I heard about the trial, and about your dismissal from the service, Admiral Kirk." He paused, then added apologetically, "In which case, I suppose I should address you as Mister Kirk."

"I don't care one way or the other, Governor Bradford," Kirk replied. The hell I don't, he added silently.

Bradford continued, "Under the circumstances, I hesitate to impose upon you; but we don't expect much help from Starfleet out here, so we have to seek help wherever we can. Starbase 55 has their hands full with illegal activities on other planets in this sector, not to mention the sheer distance from the starbase and the few ships they seem to be able to spare for patrols."

"What's the problem," Kirk asked indifferently, adding, "not that I'm offering to help you."

"I understand your position, but the situation is becoming critical. As you may know, the founding principles of this colony were those expounded over 300 years ago by the American psychologist and philosopher, B. F. Skinner, involving methods of behavior modification which had been forgotten since early in the twenty-first century. Those of us who originally settled here felt that these theories had validity and deserved further testing, preferably in an environment where the likelihood of contamination from other philosophies and ways of living would be minimal. For the past quarter-century, we have lived quietly." Bradford paused, then added soberly, "Except, that is, for a year or two in which we suffered greatly at the hands of Klingon raiders. At the time, we debated whether we should remain here, but the establishment of the starbase in this quadrant seemed to quell the Klingons effectively."

"Now, we have a new generation maturing, most of whom seem content to continue living as we have always lived; some — a small number to be sure — are not. They have caused disruption disproportionate to their numbers. They threaten the very survival of the colony by enticing other young people to question the authority of the elected officials. Two questionable characters have been seen on board the colony, in the company of these rebels."

Kirk's sixth sense jangled at Bradford's last words. "Questionable characters?" he asked in a tense whisper.

"Rough-looking men, like what one would expect to find on Netherworld," Bradford replied with overt distaste, referring to a freeworld scant kilometers from the Klingon sector.

"Are they still here?"

"No. They left." Bradford's relief was obvious. "With several of the adult men of the colony backing me up, I confronted them, told them that unless they left, I would summon a Starfleet ship."

"Even though—" Kirk began.

Bradford took up the thought, his shoulders sagging. Fear and despair showed on his face, but beneath that burned a fierce protectiveness for his colony. "Even though I fully expected that I would not receive any such assistance, things being what they are. At least, not in time. As it was," he shivered briefly, "those two thugs threatened me."

"You made a brave stand, Governor," Kirk admitted. "But I'm here only to discharge a cargo and be on my way." Kirk stood up, his eyes challenging Bradford to stop him. As he reached the door, he turned, his jaw set, his voice cold. "I'm not in the hero business anymore."

"I'm not asking you to be a hero, Kirk. And I am willing to pay you for your time and trouble."

Kirk stared at Bradford in amazement. "Do I hear you right, Governor? You want me," he hesitated, hiding an inner amusement at the situation he was being placed in, "as a hired gun?"

"If that is what you wish to call it, Kirk; yes. Perhaps the very fact that you've been dismissed from Starfleet amid extensive publicity--"

Still struggling to suppress a grin, Kirk shrugged. "Please go on, Mr. Bradford."

"Well, it might make it easier for you to, er, take a look around, investigate a bit--" Bradford stopped, considering that he sounded too much like he was trying to protect his own power. "Don't get me wrong; if the majority on Skinner's Planet wants to change, fine. But change should come about by democratic means, as a result of thorough debate of the issues and of intelligent and workable compromise, not through rebellion and anarchy."

"You won't get an argument from me about that, Mr. Bradford," Kirk assured the governor. "All right. You've hired yourself some--" he paused and found the term he'd learned from Bela Oxnix, "--muscle."

•••

Back at the Ursa Major, Kirk informed the crew of the governor's proposition. "This is an opportunity for some heavy intelligence-gathering. Ask a lot of questions. Show the holo of the boy -- not the one of Valkris; not yet. Let's find out if this kid," Kirk tapped the holograph on the table for emphasis, "came from here, and if so, who he is and who his contacts were. Then we can work on the problem of how he got mixed up with the woman." He stood up.

"You haven't told Bradford about the geological report?" McCoy asked.

"No, not yet. I'd have to blow our cover, and I don't think that's smart at this point -- especially if some of these kids here are mixed up with spies."

The left the ship in pairs -- Scott and Chekov, Uhura and Sulu, and Kirk and McCoy -- to visit the colonists in their homes, their workplaces, their fields, to present themselves as mercenaries hired by the governor to identify the two thugs who had disrupted the colony and threatened his life.

"This might cause some trouble for the governor, politically speaking," McCoy pointed out as he and Kirk walked from the ship. "I mean, us going around, phasers strapped on, telling these folks we've been hired by the governor to take care of those two characters."

Kirk shrugged. "For a while, I suppose, Bones, but I have the feeling Bradford can weather such a storm, and that when it's all over he'll come out smelling like a rose."

"Especially when these colonists find out what's out there," McCoy added, jerking a thumb towards the surrounding desert.

Kirk walked on, his hands thrust deep into his pockets, his eyes directed toward the ground. "I don't know, Bones. Somehow I get the idea that, when the presence of those deposits becomes known, it's going to kill this colony."

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It wasn't long before they had their identification. A man working in a small garden behind a quaint-looking wood frame home squinted at the holo, then told Kirk, "Why, that's Frank Malthus." The man paused, looking incredulous. "Don't tell me he's in some kind of trouble."

"He might be," Kirk said noncommittally. "Where can we find him?"

The gardener thought a minute, then replied, "Well, I don't know. He was here a couple weeks ago, but I haven't seen him since." After another pause, during which he scratched absently at the base of a vegetable plant with his hoe, the man offered, "Come to think of it, he did act a bit strange; kind of aloof. But I can't believe Frank would be in any trouble. He's always been a fine boy, if a bit stand-offish. He didn't have an easy upbringing. But the whole colony's proud of him now -- him and Ted Hayes. They graduated the Academy a year or two ago."

"Academy?" Kirk asked, shooting McCoy a quick glance.

"Starfleet Academy. Yes, we're right proud of those boys."

"Where can I find this Ted Hayes?"

The man pointed to the west. "About three blocks that way; number 12." As Kirk and McCoy departed, the colonist called after them, "What's this all about?" Neither answered; Kirk took out his communicator and alerted the rest of his crew to return to the ship and wait.

♦♦♦

Kirk silently pointed to the house number--12. He signaled for McCoy to cover the back door, then slowly, quietly moved toward the front. Carefully, he opened the door and let himself in. Crossing the parlor to the back hallway, he could hear sounds: a bureau drawer being opened and closed, footsteps pacing across the room, then back again and another drawer being opened, closed. He moved stealthily down the hall and planted himself, feet apart, fists on hips, in the doorway as Ted Hayes hurriedly packed a small carryall. The tanned, blond young man didn't notice his unannounced visitor.

"Ensign Hayes," Kirk said in a command voice.

The boy spun around, his face showing utter surprise, then puzzlement, then recognition -- what new plebe didn't know that once famous, now infamous, face? Hayes paled and exclaimed in a shocked whisper, "Admiral Kirk!"

"You might as well finish packing, son," Kirk ordered, "because you're coming with me."

"You? Where? What are you talking about?" Hayes stood at full height and glared at Kirk. "You don't have any authority in Starfleet any more."

Kirk pulled his phaser off his belt. "Here's all the authority I need. Get packed."

"Trouble, Jim?" McCoy asked as he joined his commander.

Kirk shook his head, keeping his phaser aimed at Hayes. The boy stood for another minute, then resignedly continued packing.

♦♦♦

"Sit down," Kirk ordered tersely, motioning the boy to one of the chairs in front of the comm station in his cabin aboard the tradeship. Hayes complied sullenly.

Kirk retrieved a tape chip from the safe, then sat down at the module and activated the viewer. "Take a look," he commanded as he played the taped orders he'd received from Admiral Morrow. "Now, about my authority," he said pointedly.

Hayes swallowed hard.

Kirk sat back in his chair, facing the boy, his gaze penetrating the rapidly-dissolving bravado and digging out the fear that lay beneath. His voice soft, he said, "Why don't you tell me how it all happened?"

The ensign cleared his throat nervously and said, his voice near to cracking, "I don't know where to begin."

"Did you know that Skinner's Planet holds rich deposits of dilithium crystals? And that the Klingons are prepared to go to war over them?"

"No! I didn't know that. I swear!"

"Calm down, son," Kirk said in a fatherly voice. "Tell me what you do know."

"I know Frank's in trouble, and I want to help him."

"Because he's your friend."

"Yes."

"Tell me about Frank."

"We grew up together, but he was different; he didn't have anyone. His parents were killed in the Klingon raids when we were just little, and after that, he was passed around from family to family. Never anything permanent, never any friends. Except me. I guess I kind of felt sorry for him, but I liked him, too. He was strong and smart. He had to make his own way, and he just had this independent way about him. He didn't like to accept help, even when he knew he needed it." Hayes's tone had become defensive. "He never had any love; just

passed around like somebody's castoff clothing. He wanted to go to the Academy real bad, but he didn't have anyone to foot the bill for his travel to Earth. He worked hard to make the credits, but never had enough. Then--" The boy hesitated, avoiding Kirk's gaze.

"Then what?" the Admiral prompted with a shrewd guess. "Somebody just showed up to pay his way?"

"Yeah," Hayes answered, wondering how Kirk knew. "A guy from Tombstone; I don't know his name. Set Frank up real good. Offered to pay my way to Earth, too, but I had enough credits." Again he hesitated, staring down at his hands. "I didn't want his. I didn't like him. There was something sneaky about him, and I told Frank. But he just laughed it off."

"What about your time at the Academy? How did Frank perform, how did he behave?"

"He did well, he studied hard. But he changed, too. He was still my friend, but there was part of him that was being closed off. He acted like he was driven, said he had a debt to pay."

"A debt to the guy from Tombstone, who has called in his markers and got Frank into something he couldn't get out of."

Hayes looked up. "What's going on? Please, sir. I want to help Frank."

"You are helping, by telling me everything you know. He's in trouble; his life may be in danger. Where is he now?"

"He's hiding out on Netherworld, waiting for a woman he told me about. He told me she's a Klingon." The young man fidgeted, then admitted, "I guess I should have reported this, and I'm probably in trouble for not turning him in. But he's my friend; I thought I could help him, could talk to him. I'm scared, sir. Real scared."

"I'm afraid you are in trouble," Kirk confirmed. Can I blame him totally, he asked himself. A wet-behind-the-ears, naive kid who got in over his head trying to help and protect his friend? He might be guilty of no more than misguided loyalty and poor judgment, but that isn't for me to decide. "How did he get involved with the Klingon woman? Did you ever see her?"

"No, I never saw her. But he told me about her." Hayes shook his head ruefully. "We went to Netherworld about ten months ago, on leave, for the hell of it. Wanted a little adventure, a little risky fun." The boy shook his head again. "Guess we got it, huh? Anyway, he met that woman there; the guy from Tombstone was there and I think he introduced them. Frank went off with her for the rest of the week we were there; I didn't see him again until it was time for us to go. The woman -- he called her Kris -- was trouble, I knew it. She really had a hold over him, somehow. Had him believing all sorts of things -- and her a Klingon! Dammit, sir, it was the Klingons that killed his parents!" He paused, then added softly. "It would be better for him if she doesn't show up."

"You don't have to worry about that," Kirk said coldly. "She's dead." He leaned forward and pressed a button on his console, hailing Scott on the bridge. "Get Governor Bradford and tell him we'll be leaving for a while, but we'll be back to help him handle his problem. Then set a course for Netherworld, Scotty. I think our search is just about over."

♦♦♦

As the Ursa Major rose into the inky vastness of Space, a blip appeared on Sulu's tactical sensor. "Ship approaching at high speed, sir."

"Identity?" Kirk inquired.

"She's too far away, but she's closing fast."

"Yellow alert," Kirk ordered.

Sulu set the alert condition, then checked his scanner once more. Finally, he turned to Kirk with a grin on his face. "You might want to cancel the alert, sir. It's the Enterprise."

"Very well," Kirk grinned back, "cancel alert." Uhura initiated contact with the starship and when Spock appeared on the viewer, Kirk teased, "Well, Spock, did

Gruenwald get worried and send you back out here?"

"No, Jim," Spock replied seriously. "Starfleet command sent us. As soon as they received my summary of your report on Skinner's Planet, they ordered us into the sector to protect the planet's mineral wealth against Klingon raiders. While you've been on the planet, Starfleet Intelligence has developed information to the effect that an offensive may be staged soon."

"They've been laying the groundwork for a long time, evidently," Kirk stated. He related to the Vulcan all they'd learned at the colony below them. "We're going to Netherworld to find this Frank Malthus, and his contact from Tombstone."

"Perhaps the Enterprise should accompany you there. It might be prudent for you to check in with us regularly."

McCoy, standing in his customary spot beside Kirk's chair, murmured, "You're right, Jim. This Vulcan is becoming a worrywart."

"Concern for the admiral's safety, as well as that of yourself and the rest of your crew, is not unwarranted, Doctor. Netherworld is totally lawless; respect for the sanctity of life is unknown there."

"All right, Spock," Kirk conceded with a chuckle as McCoy bridled. "Follow us."

•••

Netherworld, aptly named, lay wrapped in the Styx Nebula, providing a haven to slavers, pirates, black marketeers, and the gamut of criminal types. Under cover of the nebula, they passed freely through the zone to the nearby Klingon planets, and denizens of those worlds likewise crossed to Netherworld. If McCoy thought Pandora was raunchy, Netherworld was hell come to life.

Flying purely on dead reckoning, the Ursa Major and the Enterprise arrived at Netherworld. The planet floated in a hole in the center of the nebula. "Strange place for a planet," Kirk mused aloud as the two ships slid into orbit. He was grateful for the clear space in the nebula which the planet occupied; at least there would be little interference with communications ship-to-ship and ship-to-ground.

"We're landing at coordinates 018-294-110," Kirk relayed to Spock. "That's close to where Hayes says his friend is hiding; it's out in a desert, accessible overland only by skimmer car."

"We will scan the area continuously, and monitor communications," Spock reported. "Do you wish me to accompany you?"

Kirk shook his head. "I think we can handle it, thank you. Having a uniformed Starfleet officer with us might blow our cover," he explained in deliberate understatement. "Besides, Vulcans don't make good pirates." He signed off and ordered the Ursa Major out of orbit on a landing trajectory.

Scott had selected a landing site just over a low ridge from Malthus's hiding place, which was a rude cabin, all that remained of a long-abandoned mining camp at the edge of a desert. It would require an hour's walk to reach the cabin, but this was as close as they could get without attracting attention. Kirk left Sulu and Chekov to guard the Ursa Major.

Hayes guided Kirk and the rest of the crew to the cabin. Sidling up to the end, the admiral leaned against the rough boards and peered in the window. Inside were two men; one was the boy in the hologram — Frank Malthus. He looked ill-used, debauched; his innocence had been burned away by some soul-searing fire. The other man, a stubble-faced tough, was unfamiliar to Kirk. He motioned Hayes forward carefully and pointed silently to the unshaven stranger. Hayes looked through the dusty pane of glass, then leaned over and whispered softly into Kirk's ear, "Tombstone."

Kirk slowly backed away from the window and turned, signaling to Scott and Uhura to cover the back of the ramshackle building. "Come on," he said quietly to McCoy and Hayes. He looked at the boy, whose eyes hesitated. "Are you all right?"

Hayes nodded, swallowing with some difficulty. "Yes, sir." He tried to straighten, to put some steel in his backbone. About time I started acting like a

Starfleet officer, he chided himself, though I probably won't be one for long.

Kirk pulled his phaser up to a ready position and moved toward the door of the cabin. He flattened against the wall, then turned and burst through the door, levelling his weapon at "Tombstone."

The stranger's hand sped toward the blaster hanging at his belt. Kirk stopped him with one harsh word: "Don't!"

He motioned McCoy forward to examine the nearly-catatonic Malthus. While the doctor took care of the young man, Kirk attempted to interrogate the stranger from Tombstone.

"Who are you? What's your connection to the Klingon woman?"

"Tombstone" sat on an upended crate, glaring sullenly at Kirk, silent.

"Selling Federation secrets to the enemy can get you twenty-five years in a rehab colony," Kirk warned. "You might get some consideration if you talk."

The man maintained silence, slowly moving his jaw back and forth as if chewing. Then he grinned, murmured, "Go to hell," and keeled over. McCoy turned around at the sound of him hitting the floor, and picked up his kit.

"Poison," he muttered tersely as he ran the Feinberger over the man's body. "He must have had a capsule of it in his mouth." McCoy stood up. "He's gone."

"Damn!" Kirk exclaimed. He turned, looking at the pitiable Malthus. Hayes was standing beside his friend, his face a kaleidoscope of horror, pity, revulsion and self-blame. "How is he?" Kirk asked McCoy, pointing to Malthus.

"He's malnourished." McCoy paused, a brief look of displeasure mixed with embarrassment crossing his features. "And he has the absolute worst of the Klingon social diseases...in an advanced stage. As for his mind, well, God knows what they've done to that."

"Can he talk? Can he understand what's being said to him?"

"I think so, but go slow, Jim."

Kirk stepped over to Malthus, stopping directly in front of him. He stood silently looking down at the young man, wondering what it was that led some men to turn their backs on all they've been trained to believe in, everything they've sworn to die to protect. "Ensign Malthus," he addressed the youngster in a command voice. The young man stared blankly for a while, then slowly his eyes tracked up to Kirk's face.

"What?" he mumbled, squinting in disorientation. "Who are you?"

Hayes answered. "He's Admiral Kirk, Frank."

Malthus turned, dimly recognizing his friend's voice. "That you, Teddy boy? What are you doing here?"

"He brought me. We came looking for you."

"Found me," Malthus said succinctly. He stared blankly at the far wall for a few more moments, then looked up at Hayes once more. "I'm waiting for Kris, you know."

"I know, Frank," Hayes said softly. "That's why Admiral Kirk is here. He needs to talk to you about her."

Kirk glanced at Hayes, noting the gentle tone in which he addressed his friend. Is it so different? he wondered. This boy has risked his own career and his own neck for a friend. Just as I did, in taking McCoy back to Genesis and Spock back to Vulcan. He sat down next to Malthus.

"Ensign, I need to ask you some questions."

Malthus nodded dumbly.

"It was you who sold the Genesis information to Valkris, wasn't it?"

Malthus sat immobile, his eyes fixed back on the wall. Kirk waited. Finally, the young man answered, unrepentant, "Yes."

"How did you get the information?"

"I did a turn in Comm Central. One night this report came through on the coded frequency." He glanced up, almost smug. "It looked like something my friends would be interested in."

Hayes shot Kirk a sharp look. "What are you saying?" he demanded. Genesis had been a proscribed topic, but the entire fleet had been buzzing with gossip

about it, especially after Kirk had hijacked the old Enterprise. "You didn't tell me anything about this!"

Kirk looked up. "That's the trouble your friend is in," he stated simply. "Treason and espionage."

"I don't understand. I thought it was something to do with the dilithium deposits on Skinner's that you told me about."

"It is," Kirk replied crisply. "The Klingons are ready to go to war over those deposits — at the same time they were talking peace with the Federation Council! And they thought the Genesis device was a weapon they could use in that war."

"Oh, my God," Hayes murmured. "I didn't know. I really didn't know." He turned to his friend. "Frank, how could you? Don't you know what that would have meant? The Klingons would have come back to Skinner's, just like they did when we were kids. Only this time, they wouldn't have left anyone alive!" He shook his head in disbelief. "How could you?"

Malthus gazed at Hayes, almost looking through him to some scene only he could see. His voice sounded from deep in his throat, "You don't know, Teddy boy, what it was like. The whole time I was growing up, I felt totally unwanted. Nobody cared to take the responsibility for me, they just passed me around to the next people in line when they got tired of me. I just wanted someone to notice me, to take some kind of interest in me. And when Nain," he pointed to the dead man lying on the plank floor, "paid my way to go to the Academy, I owed him."

"But, Frank," Hayes groaned. "Spying?"

"I was hungry, Teddy boy. Nain fed me, like nobody else ever did. And when he introduced me to Kris, well that was just the icing on the cake." Malthus smiled a sick, sated smile. "Oh, Teddy, you don't know what she can do to a man. Her skin is like purest satin, her touch is like fire. God! She knows things that would turn you inside out and leave you drained." Malthus licked his lips, adding, "And wanting more."

Kirk felt his jaw tighten, sour revulsion rising from his gut to his throat. He looked from Malthus to Hayes. There is one difference, he told himself, between my situation and Hayes's: my friends are worth the risk.

Hayes walked to the other side of the room, then turned back. His face was set in granite, his eyes blazing. With no pity in his voice, he spat, "Your Klingon lover's dead, Frank. Admiral Kirk said she was killed by her own people. They threw her away, just like they were going to throw you away. You're lucky the admiral got to you first."

Malthus shuddered. "Dead? Kris?" With tremendous effort, he stood up and stumbled across the room, grasping Hayes's jacket front with both hands. "You lying bastard!"

Kirk sprang up and grabbed Malthus from behind, pinning his arms. "He's telling the truth," he hissed in the boy's ear. He slammed Malthus up against the wall and spun him around. "One of the people your Klingon friends killed," he growled, "was my son!"

Kirk wasn't ready for the boy's reaction. From some hidden reservoir of grief and resentment and loneliness, Malthus drew one last burst of strength. He braced himself against the wall, then propelled himself forward, his shoulder catching Kirk in the gut. Rolling into the fall, he sprang up and lurched for the door, knocking McCoy aside, and wrenching the phaser from the doctor's belt. He fired two short bursts, putting Kirk and McCoy out of action.

Hayes gathered himself to spring, but Malthus stopped him, warning, "I'll drop you, too, Teddy. Just stay put." He reached down and relieved Kirk of his phaser. Searching the admiral's pockets, he found the magna-lock for the Ursa Major. "The key to his ship, right?"

A bump from the rear of the cabin drew Malthus's attention. The back door splintered and gave way as Scott and Uhura crashed into the room. Malthus was ready; he fired two more short bursts, stunning both. As they fell, he aimed the phaser at Hayes once more. "Where's the ship?"

"Frank, for God's sake, what do you think you're going to do? If what Admiral Kirk says is true, about what you've done, the galaxy won't be big enough to hide you from Starfleet — or from him," Hayes concluded, pointing at the unconscious Kirk.

"You forget we're just a hop from the Klingon side, and there are plenty of places to hide over there.

Hayes shook his head. What's the difference, he told himself. Kirk has guards posted, and there's that Starfleet ship in orbit up there. But if Frank's heading for the Klingon side, he won't live long, even if he does get away. "All right. There's a trader landed about four miles west."

"Good boy, Teddy. You've always been a good and true friend," Malthus said smugly as he headed for the door.

Hayes gave him a parting shot. "Too bad I can't say the same about you, and that it took this to make me realize it."

"Breaks of the game, Teddy," Malthus answered back, closing the door behind him.

As soon as Malthus was out the door, Hayes knelt down and tried to revive Kirk. The stun effect was slow in wearing off, but in a few minutes, the admiral began to come around. Hayes helped him sit up.

Kirk rubbed his forehead, shook his head, and finally asked, in a slow, thick voice, "Where's your friend?"

"Heading for your ship."

Kirk stood, unsteadily. "How long ago?"

"Only about five minutes."

"Stay here," Kirk instructed as he picked up the unconscious Scott's phaser and moved toward the door.

"No, sir. I'm coming with you. He's my responsibility, at least in part."

Kirk looked at Hayes, seeing, for the first time, strength and maturity in his eyes. "All right," he nodded, accepting the young man's role in the chase. "Let's go."

♦♦♦

They trailed Malthus back to the Ursa Major. Half a kilometer from the ship, they found Sulu lying unconscious, his phaser mere centimeters from his outstretched hand. Kirk bent down, checking the helmsman's carotid pulse. "He's all right," he murmured, more to assure himself than to inform Hayes. He stood up and they continued toward the ship, which sat just over the crest of a ridge.

When Kirk and Hayes reached the top of the rise, they could see Malthus nearing the tradeship.

"He's going to steal your ship, sir," Hayes told Kirk.

The admiral reached into his pocket, felt that the magna-lock was gone, and looked inquiringly at Hayes.

"He took it while you were stunned."

"If he opens that hatch and goes inside...", Kirk murmured. He took off running down the rise, yelling, "Malthus! Stop!"

Malthus turned, firing a short blast. Kirk leaped aside, rolling away from the blue bolt that sent dirt flying as it struck the ground. From behind the rocks farther beyond the ship, Chekov came running. Kirk signaled for him to stop and wait.

Malthus reached the hatchway and turned again. Seeing Chekov out of the corner of his eye, he fired at him, sending him sprawling and clawing for cover. He thumbed the phaser control and warned Kirk, "I've got this thing set to kill, now, Kirk. I'm taking your ship and you're not going to stop me."

"Don't open that hatch, Malthus," Kirk yelled back. "She's booby-trapped!"

Malthus laughed. "Nice try, Kirk!"

"Frank!" Hayes called. "Don't make things worse! You don't have a chance. There's a starship in orbit up there, and they'll blast you out of space."

Malthus raised the phaser toward Hayes and Kirk yelled, "Take cover!"

Hayes jumped for a large boulder, landing hard on his side, knocking the wind out of his lungs. Malthus fired and the boulder disintegrated. Then he spun toward Chekov's position and exploded his cover, sending him scurrying. He laughed at Kirk, who stood his ground, waiting.

Malthus aimed squarely at the admiral. They stared at each other, saying nothing. Keeping the phaser aimed at Kirk, Malthus raised the magna-lock with his left hand and applied it to the side of the hatch. As the hatch was opening, he turned to duck inside.

"Don't!" Kirk shouted, but it was too late. Malthus was inside before the computer could request his identity.

Hayes stumbled forward to try to catch Malthus before the hatch closed. Kirk, seeing the boy rush toward the ship, took off after him, tackling him just short of the hatchway.

"Get out of here!" Kirk shouted, pulling Hayes back.

"Let me go! I've got to stop him. It's my responsibility."

Kirk grasped Hayes's jacked firmly. "I wasn't bluffing! The ship is booby-trapped. She's going to self-destruct."

Hayes stared at Kirk, then back at the ship. He shook his head slowly.

"There's nothing we can do, but get out of here and avoid getting ourselves killed," Kirk said in a gentler tone. He pulled Hayes away and they both ran for cover. They were just clearing the last few feet between them and a narrow gully when the ship tore itself apart in a deafening clap of thunder. Yellow fire flared up and out, culminating in a thick, gray smoke. Kirk and Hayes tumbled into the gully, propelled in part by the force of the blast. Hayes picked himself up and peered over the lip of the ditch at the smoldering remains of the ship. Softly he asked a question to which there could never, for him, be an answer: "Why, Frank?"

♦♦♦

"What's going to happen to the Hayes boy?" McCoy asked Kirk, who sat quietly at the desk in the VIP cabin aboard the Enterprise.

"He's going to have to face a board of inquiry, at least."

McCoy looked at Kirk. "They could go pretty hard on him."

Kirk returned McCoy's gaze, his eyes calm. "Not after I get through telling them what I have to say about it."

McCoy smiled. After a minute, he asked, "Well, what are we going to do now? I guess we're back in Starfleet's good graces."

Kirk grinned broadly. "I'll say we are." He picked up a tape chip which lay on the desk top and inserted it into the viewer console. The image of Admiral Morrow appeared as Kirk told McCoy, "This came in this morning."

"Congratulations, Admiral Kirk," the image of Morrow said formally. "The Klingon espionage ring in that quadrant has been smashed, including the man who murdered the geologist on Tombstone and sent that Klingon fighter after you. The dilithium deposits on Skinner's Planet are now under Federation protection. Governor Bradford has consented to allow supervised mining operations, providing they do not interfere with the development of the colony. We have reached a lease agreement which the governor finds acceptable, and construction of facilities will begin soon."

"There are several matters in that quadrant which still require Starfleet attention, and Starbase 55 has inadequate facilities, manpower, and ships to assign to these matters. This situation will take some time to rectify, so in the meantime, as the new commanding officer of the Enterprise, you are directed to provide protection to Pandora, at the request of Mr. Hector Gruenwald, against piracy. You are also directed to enforce Federation law on Netherworld, and to eliminate any Klingon influence on that planet."

Morrow leaned forward on the desk in front of him, his tone and manner becoming informal. "Jim, it looks like you're going to have your hands full for a while, but we're confident that you will do your usual thorough and commendable job. Good luck."

The image disappeared. Kirk and McCoy looked at each other and grinned.



NOTES on the Klingon language used in the story:

The source for the Klingonese used in this story is Marc Okrand's Klingon Dictionary. Translation of the Klingonese is as follows:

bIHeghqu', tera'gnan!	You will die, Earther!
bilaj SanIij	Accept your fate
bIHegh, Qi'rq!	Die, Kirk!

surprize!

These pretty, twinkling lights
can move people from place to place.

I don't know how or why,
but everyone leaves together,
all at once.

Well, you're not leaving me behind this time --
ready or not, here I come.

Surprise!

This time there isn't the same tingle;
the sparkling lights were slower,
and I thought for sure I'd toss my cookies
before the room stopped spinning
and we reformed --

excuse me, "rematerialized."

Imagine my surprise
when Mr. Scott told me

I could have killed them both
by hitchiking in a transporter beam.

Seems the power was only set for one warm body,
and if Mr. Scott's magic hands
hadn't been on the controls,
our molecules could have been
scattered from here to Fresno.
And then Dr. McCoy stormed off,
muttering something about
cling-on units being
"worse than Romans."

Looks like the surprise was on me and somehow,
I think I'm in for more, for sure!

— Ellen Hulley

Home Again, Home Again

by Karen C. Hunter

(for T and T)

Starship Enterprise
Shakedown Cruise
8659.7

Supply Officer Tessira n'ha Melora
Starship Endeavor
Quadrant G Sector XII

Dear Tess,

We're Back! Did ya see it, did ya, huh? The Enterprise is back! And I'm back on board. Well, actually, of course, this isn't the same Enterprise. This is a new ship with the same name. But, she is of Constitution class, not transwarp class, and she is new and beautiful and James T. Kirk is her captain. I couldn't wait to tell you the good news. And. . .I'm Supply Chief again! So, the bet is still good, and we'll probably be rendezvousing with you for the war games in six months — and you owe me dinner. This time I will really feel like celebrating.

When last I wrote, things concerning my ship and crewmates were pretty uncertain. Things got more uncertain as time passed. I told you Spock was alive, and all were safe on Vulcan. Well, they stayed there for a long time. Kirk had that Bird of Prey, and the support of the Vulcan council and ambassadors. But he also had the admiralty down his neck as well as the Klingon Ambassador agitating the Federation Council to have him arrested and tried for the deaths of the crew of that ship. Have you seen it on any news reports? That guy was really good! If you didn't know any better, you could really think his poor ship and the crew had very unjustifiably been destroyed by a mystery weapon. Of course, the secretiveness with which Starfleet and Federation councils had treated the genesis project was very much in his favor. They had to do a lot of background work to explain genesis and what actually happened, which tended to make them sound like guilty people defending themselves. For awhile there I was afraid that Morrow was going to have to throw Kirk and company to the dogs in order to settle everything down. I don't even know what happened to Admiral Nogura. Despite his differences with Kirk, I expected him to come to the aid of his officers and their mission, but he was rather conspicuous by his absence. The only support Kirk had, in the face of all the bad publicity, was Sarek of Vulcan. And, he could always be dismissed by the newscasters as rather prejudiced. After all, his son was rescued by Kirk. He could be expected to be on Kirk's side. The humans tended to think of that as a nice thing but not very reliable, and the Klingons kept calling him a puppet of the

Federation Council. Poor Sarek. I'll bet he never had those two insults leveled at him before!!!

This went on for a long time. Or maybe it just seemed like that to me. After Uhura was discovered on Vulcan, someone noticed that she had been doing her duty shifts here all the time she had been there. So they started to check on who was actually doing the work. I had never told my young friend my real name, but when they started after him, he gave them a description. Since I was a suspect already as Enterprise crew, well, all was discovered. I lost my job tending an obscure transporter station, and I got kicked out of counting pencils and paperclips in Fleet deployment. At first they weren't going to let me do anything at all, but when they realized I had to stay around for any trials or things like that, and they couldn't put me in the brig and would have to feed me and support me, they decided I'd better get some work done to justify my existence. DO YOU KNOW WHAT THEY DID WITH ME? I ended up back where I started, several years ago, in a small supply closet in the TOQ, handling towels and linens and laundry and all that shit. I'm serious - stop laughing. The only comfort I got out of that was knowing that I was the most highly paid supply clerk in the history of Starfleet. I also fiddled around with the programming on the towels. (Being in Spock's science department all these years has had a good effect on me.) I've reworked the ratios -- the higher rank a person is, the smaller towels are issued. This took me a long time, but I've done a worm (or whatever the hackers call it) and my program is going to infect every program it comes in contact with. Every admiral in Starfleet is going to have to bathe with a towel about two feet by ten inches. Ha. Except on the Enterprise, which I have inoculated against my program. Oh boy, ain't power grand...

You'd probably like to have a first hand account of what happened when the unknown probe was examining Earth, and I wish I had something to tell you. It was pretty scary at the time. It didn't last all that long, but it was so intense and sudden, and knocked out so many of our defenses and things, that the damage is still being repaired. Kind of a shock to some of our illustrious admirals who thought Earth could be defended against anything. (Notice they have forgotten about Veger already. Rather undermines one's confidence, doesn't it?) I was not on duty at the time. Of course not. Not only did I get the worst duty in supply, I also got the worse shift. I went to see my former partner and dragged him on duty with me once to show him how much trouble he got me in. I swear, I am taking that boy with me to Enterprise. With Uhura teasing him and calling him Mr. Adventure, and me threatening to cut off his ... supplies, well, he might just grow up eventually and make a decent officer. Maybe.

Where was I? Oh yeah. The storm. I had very luckily decided this was a day to stay in, despite an invitation to go sailing. When people realized what was going on, I went up to the Ease to see if anything could be done. I could barely get there. I ended up soaked to my skin, standing in a lounge and watching a view screen with everyone else and wondering just how soon we were all going to die. It somehow seemed ironic that of all Starfleet, the people they were trying to destroy were probably going to live the longest. We saw the Bird of Prey come in and saw it leave almost at once. I had no idea what was going on, but that started to give me hope. I knew Kirk would not just leave -- he was going to DO something. It seemed like we only waited a minute or two and they were back. The storm ended. It was incredible.

Of course, Earth is a shambles, and a lot of people have died, and Starfleet ships were destroyed. But we now have two lovely whales swimming around San Francisco Bay. They stuck around for a long time, which surprised Kirk's imported scientist from the 21st century. I think those silly whales were showing off. They liked being on display and I think they know they saved Earth. Wow. Anyway, there is a lot of footage on video now about whales, and Gillian gives whale lectures all the time. Everyone on Earth has bought a whale poster or a ceramic whale or a carved wooden whale or something. Half the museums in the world have hauled out everything on whales they could put on display and are making

reproductions and who knows what else. Let me warn you — humans have a new fad! Let us hope that the new baby whale expected is a female, and we will have a fairly viable whale population one of these days. The cloning people think they can do something, too. We'll see. I am justifiably a bit pessimistic about the long term chances.

Anyway, once the bug hurrah was all over, and Kirk and company had been given back the Enterprise, I rushed myself as quickly as I could over to his office and reminded him I was around. I really wanted my job back -- and if I had to do some more computer finagling to get it, I would do that. But I didn't have to. Kirk took one look at me - figured out who I was after a bit -- and put me right to work. The ship is a new one, and she is fitted with everything new. But, all she has on board are the standard things. Well, with all the years of being on board the old ship that everyone had, there are all sorts of non-standard things and favorite items that just have to be there. For example, I know that Kirk has to have lots and lots of extra shirts programmed for him, the way he tears them up just climbing in and out of Jeffries tubes. And Spock doesn't use standard issue soap but has to have this weird Vulcan stuff instead. And Scotty wants at least double of all engineering supplies plus his own odd assortment of wee bits and pieces. And Dr. McCoy wouldn't dream of being on duty anywhere in the known universe without the chocolate mint cookies he noshes (in secret). You get the idea. Somebody has to program in all this stuff, and spend time on shore leave buying this for everyone, and in general keep things ship shape and Bristol fashion. It's great. I've actually gone and made myself indispensable. Job security ... I hope.

Now we are in the process of reforming the crew. There has been a general order issued that any former crew members who are interested can request reassignment. Of course, a lot of people can't or won't come back, so Kirk is working on the additional assignments he needs. At the moment, we need can't say for sure who will be here. But there has been one new medical officer who has McCoy simply bouncing on his toes. Did you know that Leonard H. has a brother? I sure didn't. But a new McCoy named Terrell J. has appeared on the scene. TJ, as he is called most of the time (except when his brother calls him something rotten and brotherly) is not a surgeon. He has been trained on Vulcan and is an Etheric Physician. (When I call him a psychic healer, he just sniffs.) Spock is thrilled to have someone who can do Vulcans properly. And, to be honest, so is a lot of the crew. I don't know who he does it, to be honest, but he can take away headaches and minor aches and pains very quickly, just with his hands. His brother is very proud of him, (TJ calls his brother Lee, by the way. We are all getting used to that as well.) That is probably the best of the new crew who have appeared so far.

Unhappily, however, we have almost definitely lost Saavik for the time being. She stayed behind on Vulcan with Spock's family, and he isn't saying when she will rejoin Starfleet. What most of us didn't know at the time she was on the ship, is that Saavik is only half Vulcan and in fact has no Vulcan family. Apparently there is a lot of things she needs to know and do. This puzzles me a lot. I was hoping to see her again and talk. But, maybe after things get settled down and she does whatever it is she has to do there, she'll be back. I hope so.

Now I have taken all the time I have available this week to write letters just to get you up to date. I hope you have a fairly clear picture of what is going on around here. How soon we'll be all refitted and crewed is anybody's guess, but I rather suspect Kirk will have us back in action in the shortest time possible. So, be looking for us at the war games. And look for us to be spectacular. Starfleet's newest captain is going to show off for all the old fogies. See ya.

Love, Teri

P.S. I still don't know where Admiral Nogura went. You haven't heard anything have you? T.



Hello, Darkness, My Old Friend

by Vel Jaeger

For Toni, because she said, "Imagine what he must be thinking!"

Robert Briggs replaced the phone receiver and heaved a discouraged sigh. Still no answer at Gillian's apartment, and no sign that she would return to the Institute any time soon. For the fourth time that day he buzzed his secretary. "Charlotte, any messages from Dr. Taylor while I was at lunch?"

A pause, then the answer, "No, sir," sounded from the intercom. "She probably hasn't cooled down enough yet. You know her temper."

"Yeah, you're probably right. And I deserve the treatment for not letting her say goodbye to George and Gracie. She'll be in tomorrow at the regular time, and dream up another project to sink her teeth into." He sighed again in resignation, then shuttered the office window against the sight of the empty tanks in the courtyard below.

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"Mrs. Graham, excuse me for bothering you, but have you seen Gillian lately? She, ah, left work early yesterday and didn't come in at all this morning. I tried her door just now, but there's no answer. I thought maybe--"

"Hold on there now, slow down. Dinna be in such a rush!" The elderly woman who had responded to the knock on her office door held up her hands in supplication. "Dr. Taylor not at work, ye say? Well now, if she's been ailin', I'd better take a look. Imagine if the puir wee thing has collapsed and be needin' attention. Come along!"

Closing the door behind them, she fluttered her hands at him in a shooing motion, and headed for the stairs.

"Thanks, Mrs. Graham, I was hoping you'd see it that way," Briggs said as he led the way. "I can't imagine any other reason for her not calling in by now."

Pulling out a huge ring of keys from her pocket, the landlady selected one and unlocked the door at the top of the stairway. "Dr. Taylor?" she called through the doorway. "Are ye there?" Silence hung over the rooms, the only movement a whisper of curtain in the gentle morning breeze.

"Maybe she's still in bed," Briggs suggested. "She's going to be really mad if she picked today to sleep in."

"Aye, ye wait here and I'll go see," the tiny woman replied, bustling toward the bedroom. Returning after only a moment, she reported, "Not a sign of her. And she hasna called in, ye say? Perhaps she decided to take a wee vacation."

Briggs shook his head in irritation. "That's ridiculous -- she'd have told you at least, if for no other reason than to hold the mail and look after the

place. Besides, her suitcase is still here in the closet."

"Well now, there's Mr. Cable next door," she suggested. "He allus tends to her plants on the balcony, even when she's here. Maybe he'll know somethin'." Unlatching the old-fashioned French doors, Mrs. Graham stepped onto the balcony, separated from its neighbor by a low, wooden railing.

Spotting a figure a few feet away, she called out, "Ach, Mr. Cable, I thought ye might be out here at your paintin', this bein' such a fine mornin'."

"Morning, Mrs. Graham." A tall, slender man in his early forties looked up from the canvas he was studying. "Gillian off somewhere?"

"That's what I was goin' to ask ye," she said. "Dr. Briggs here says she's nae been to work lately. He's not saying', but I think they've had a lover's quarrel and she's teaching him to not take her for granted," the old woman cackled with a twinkle of a clear gray eye.

"That's absurd!" Briggs exploded. "We're only good friends, as you will know. Yes, we had a fight — and not for the first time about her damn whales. Fight is a good word for it, too; she gave me a smack in the chops that should have loosened teeth." Nervously circling the balcony, he picked up a geranium and turned the pot in his hands. "I've never seen her so angry. There's no predicting what she'll do in a mood like this."

The artist interrupted with, "She could have gone to visit relatives. Or maybe she's just driving around."

"For twenty-four hours?" he snorted. "Not likely. And there aren't any relatives. She was orphaned at six when her parents were killed, and raised by a series of foster parents, none of whom she ever had much use for. The most important living things in her life were those damn whales. She's positively possessed about them. Knowing her, she could have jumped in a rowboat and tried to follow them to Alaska!"

"Alaska?" the two bystanders asked in unison.

"We sent George and Gracie to Alaska ahead of schedule without telling Gillian," he explained. "That's what she's so pissed about. And now we can't even keep track of them, since their radio transmitters failed after a few hours. Shut off all at once, like someone threw a switch. One damn problem after another."

Leaving two puzzled witnesses behind, he carefully set the potted flower back in its place, then headed for the glass doors. "If she doesn't check in by the end of the day," he called back over a shoulder, "I'm calling the police."

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"Lieutenant, I'm telling you that she's a very responsible person. Gillian Taylor would not go off somewhere without telling anyone." Rising to his feet, he anxiously paced the small room allotted the Missing Persons section of the police station. "Her landlady said she hasn't been home in two days, and she's never missed a single day of work before now."

A uniformed officer interrupted his outburst to hand a sheet of paper to the detective sitting with an expression of long-suffering patience stamped on his face. "Thought you'd want to see this, sir."

Only a moment passed while the detective scanned the information. "Damn!" he blurted. "This isn't good — Dr. Taylor's truck has been found in San Jose. A couple of kids say they found the vehicle with the keys still in the ignition in Golden Gate Park. Claim they were just out for a ride to visit a friend, and only 'borrowing' the truck when the CHIPs pulled them over. No priors, and they're wailing their heads off. I guess we call out the dogs and start searching the park. Sorry, Dr. Briggs. Considering the time frame you've established with her missing two days of work, I think you'd better prepare yourself for the worst."

Briggs sank down into the chair and buried his face in his hands.

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"Sorry, Lieutenant, I wish I could give you a better description of the guy. But they weren't here very long — besides, it was really crowded. Thursday's our special on spaghetti, y'know. And Gillian's always bringing visitors here; usually they yak so long they close the place." The waiter raised empty hands in a gesture

of helplessness.

The weary policeman flipped back through several pages of notes. "Let's see if I have this straight. Dr. Taylor and some guy in a 'faggy-looking purple suit' arrived at eight PM. They ordered two beers and a pizza. Then they suddenly had to leave when the guy's beeper went off. Taylor paid for the bill on her Visa card because this guy didn't have any money. And you can't give a better description of the man than 'fiftyish, dark hair, Caucasian, average height and weight'."

"That's the best I can do. I wouldn't have remembered him at all if Gillian wasn't such a regular customer," the waiter replied. "You guys think he might have had something to do with her disappearing?"

The officer shrugged in response. "Who knows? Right now we're only reconstructing her movements for the last few days."

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CI Scientist Missing: Search Expands

San Francisco: The police search of Golden Gate Park today revealed no trace of Dr. Gillian Taylor, the Cetacean Institute scientist reported missing since December 16. At one point in the search bloodhounds seemed to pick up her scent near a jogging path, but lost the trail in the middle of an open grassy area. "Damndest thing I ever saw," said one of the handlers. "It's as if she disappeared into thin air!"

A wallet discovered in a trash receptacle by sanitation workers was identified by Dr. Robert Briggs, Director of the Institute, as belonging to Dr. Taylor. All cash and credit cards had been removed, leading police to suspect foul play. Those same sanitation workers were evasive when questioned about reports of mysterious lights seen in the park late at night during the past week. Speculations as to a recurrence of cult rituals that have plagued park officials in the past could not be verified.

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The photos lay scattered over the desk, cascading in disarray onto a nearby chair. "Well, Mr. — Leland, was it? — we certainly appreciate your being so civic-minded by bringing in these shots from your visit to the Institute. Every bit of background information helps our investigation. We'll return these as soon as the case is closed," said the detective.

"Oh, that's okay," replied Leland, adjusting his glasses as he spoke, "I always have double prints made. You can keep these. Too bad those two guys you're interested in weren't in better focus. But I was concentrating on the whales, not the crowd."

"Still, this gives us a lead we didn't have before," he continued. "The one in the robe — he's the one who jumped in the tank? And you're sure he didn't have any accent? Looks like an alien to me."

"Nope. Just made the one comment on hunting whales to extinction being illogical. Dr. Taylor told the rest of us to say downstairs when she caught him swimming in the tank, playing with one of the whales. I guess he and his friend got tossed out for that little stunt, huh? You figure they were involved in her disappearance?"

"Nah, probably not — nor anyone else that visited CI. But thanks for the help anyway. We have to check every angle." The detective gathered up the photos and shoved them into a bulging file.

"No problem. She was a nice lady."

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The elderly Asian woman tapped at the door labeled "office." A white haired figure only slightly taller responded to the knock.

"Mrs. Lee, what a lovely surprise. Please come in. That's nae my dress, is it?"

"No, no — this belong to your pretty lady doctor, she forgetting again, so I bring it by. Nice lady, but never remember her laundry." Holding out the plastic shrouded garment, a look of confusion crossed her wrinkled face as the other woman reacted with dismay.

"That's Dr. Taylor's dress? You mean you hav'na heard?" She reached out to grasp the old woman by the elbow and drew her inside. "Come in, I'll fix some tea and tell you all about it. Such a tragedy!"

"Something happen to lady doctor? Is she sick?"

"That's right, you don't read English, so you wouldn't know. Dr. Taylor disappeared last month. They found her truck, but nary a sign of her. The police think somethin' terrible happened tae her, that she might hae been kidnapped in the park, an' murdered or worse. Her young gentlemen from the Institute has been beside himself with grief --he blames himself, y'know. They had an awful quarrel the mornin' she was last seen alive, she actually slapped him, she did. Poor Dr. Briggs is certain sure that if she hadn't driven off in a huff, she'd be here still."

The old woman prated on as she led her visitor into the kitchen, and seated her in a chair. "Here, let me take that -- there's a lady upstairs e'en now, taking the last of her things." She took the pink garment and laid it carefully over the back of another chair. "Such a shame, her things bein' sold for the back rent an' all. But her bein' all alone in this world, with no family, there was no one to take charge of her affairs." Clucking in dismay, she filled a pot with water and sighed, "What a waste, what a waste. Such a bright future she had."

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With the last price tag in place, the inventory was completed, and the crisp young woman tapped a pencil impatiently against her clipboard as Briggs caressed a bronze figurine one last time.

"Dr. Briggs, I appreciate your assistance, but I really must be getting back to the office. You'll be able to bid on these items the same as anyone else. Like I said before, there's not likely to be much competition -- these pieces aren't much in demand."

"Yes, Mrs. Dietl, you've been very patient, and I know you're stretching the rules by even letting me stay here while you pack everything. I just can't help wishing the building owners could have found another way to settle their lien than by auctioning off Gillian's personal things."

"Yes, well, if you don't mind--"

"Actually, I do, but as everyone keeps telling me, I have no legal right to be here." Picking up the loaded carton, he headed for the door. "I'll carry this downstairs for you."

The assistant manager of Bayside Estate Sales stopped at the threshold to gaze about the empty rooms. What had this woman been like, she wondered, to have haunted people so? There hadn't been much to catalog, only personal effects and a few small sculptures, as the apartment had been rented furnished.

Only the bookcase revealed much of the personality of the owner -- obviously a scientist of some sort, judging from all the technical journals. Usually there was a lot of clutter to sort through when someone died suddenly, but not this time. A box of photos and newspaper clippings, a few knickknacks, and the bookcase were all that hinted at an individual -- almost as if this were a temporary arrangement, and the resident didn't plan to stay long. Dietl sighed as she closed the door and murmured, "Another oddball scientist. At least this one made by my job easier."

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"Sold!" The final bank of the auctioneer's gavel caused Briggs to flinch, as if the instrument had struck him instead of the tabletop. The last items were now his -- the shoebox of photos and clippings no one else wanted, and a small, blown-glass pair of whales -- the last physical remembrance he would have of Gillian. Even writing the check had hurt, one final reminder that hope had been exhausted. Cradling the box under one arm, and placing the glass and gilt piece in a coat pocket, he left the cold sterility of the auction house.

Once alone in his apartment, he would sift through the photos and cards, scraps of memory that were all that remained of Gillian Taylor. He already knew each item too well, having sorted through them time and again, searching in vain for a clue, a hint, a trace that would lead anywhere but to an inescapable

conclusion.

He fingered the glass figurine in his pocket as he walked along her street. Her street -- so much had she touched, places, people things. At times it seemed the whole city had known her, shared her joy of living, basked in her smile that would brighten any room she entered, any person she encountered.

She didn't have to guide tours at the Institute, but she chose to share her enthusiasm and fervor with any and all who cared to listen. Of course, sometimes that attracted the crackpots as well, like the nut who jumped in to swim with the whales just before they were released. What if one of them What if? What if? The phrase haunted him, lurked in the shadows of his mind, never allowing him peace.

The tiny glass whales had been a gift from a teacher -- Gillian especially loved talking to the visiting school groups, inflaming them with the injustice of whaling, setting fire to yet another band of young crusaders. "They're the ones we're saving the whales for, it's their future," she would say. The tiny whales sang to her of tomorrow's hope. The symbol had now become priceless to him.

•••

"We've never said goodbye," he spoke to the rows of people standing on the cliffside, his words floating away in the sound of the endless waves crashing against the rocks below. "A year ago today was the last anyone ever saw of Gillian Taylor. Today we must let her go, release her soul to whatever course it now takes, and hold her only in our hearts."

Briggs talked at length, forcing the words past the tightening of his throat. He told of her achievements --academic, professional, personal. And by the time he finished speaking his voice was barely above a whisper and the tears flowed freely down his cheeks.

"We have no body to consign to these depths, but as her life was devoted to that which dwells within the seas, here we consign her memory."

Selecting a wreath from the mass of floral arrangements, he walked to the protective fence at the rim of the cliff. Moving his lips in silent benediction, he tossed the wreath out into the waves with all his strength. One by one, others in the gathering followed his lead, all whose lives had been touched by Gillian: colleagues from the Institute; neighbors, merchants, even several of the police detectives who had searched for her came to pay their last respects.

Briggs stood by the railing, watching as the flowers bobbed on the surface. The memorial service was finished; the mourners departed, returning to their own lives. Dusk had fallen and now Venus shone dimly against the darkening sky. Reaching into a pocket one last time, he held the tiny glass whales, then cast them after the flowers in final tribute. Raising his face to the flickering light, he whispered softly, "Star light, star bright ... wish I may, wish I might"





Ahh, Enterprise
we sing to
your spirit . . .

TONI HARDEMAN '87

SEPTEMBER 8, 1966

THE VOYAGE BEGINS



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